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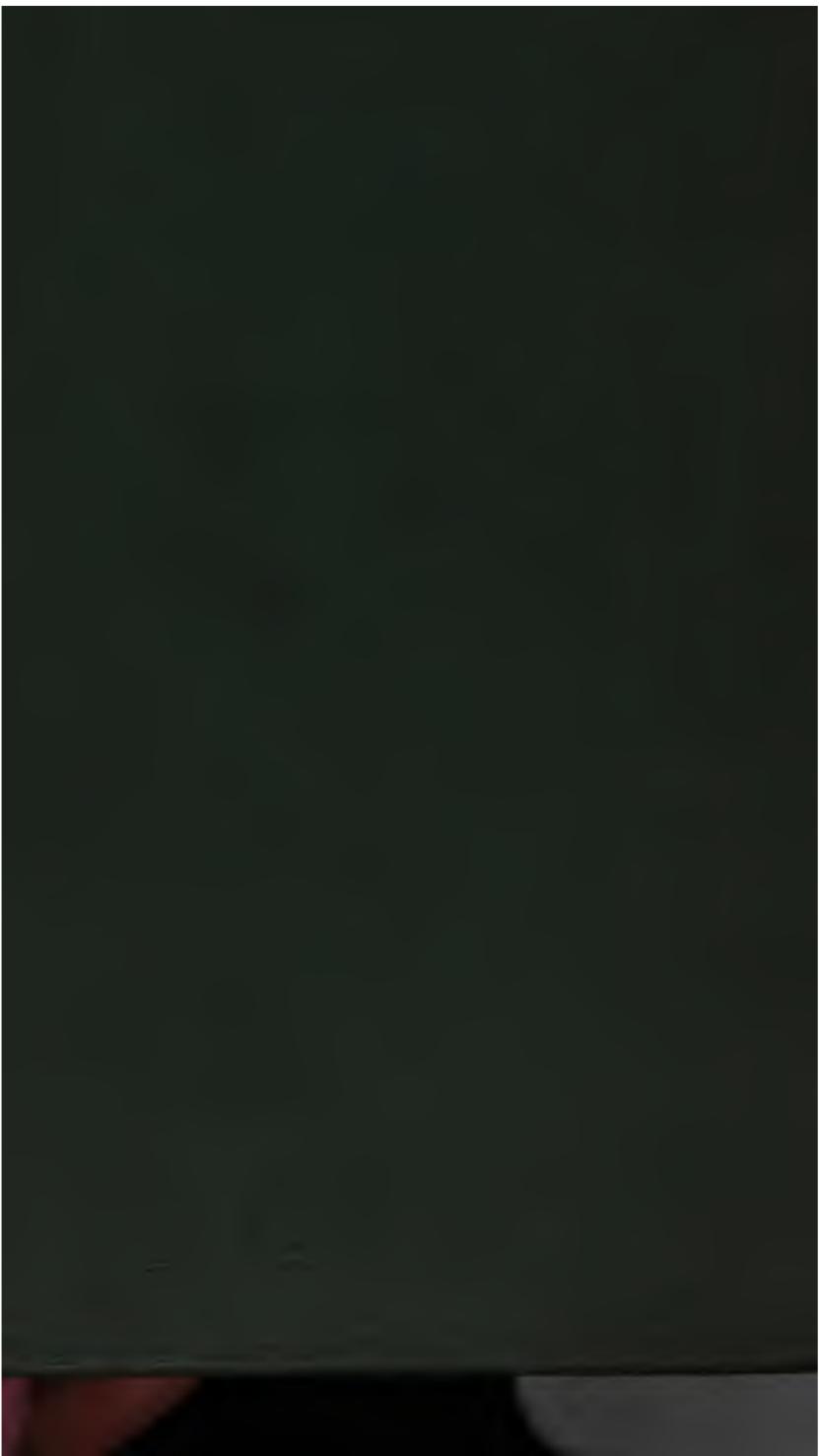
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CALLING THE TUNE

JUSTIN HUNTRY McCARTHY



W/8 '24. H.D.L.

CALLING THE TUNE

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

AUTHOR OF "A HEALTH UNTO HIS MAJESTY,"
"IF I WERE KING," ETC.



HODDER & STOUGHTON
NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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CALLING THE TUNE

CALLING THE TUNE

CHAPTER I

WHERE IS THE FRIEND OF LONG AGO?

“**G**EE, this is bully.”

The speaker was not an American, did not even look like an American, but he felt that the situation called for the conventional, hall-marked and highly respectable American comment. He might very well have said to himself — for the remark, though vocally uttered, was addressed to no companion — “Now this is very pleasant,” or “This is simply ripping.” Also he might have said things of the same nature in French, or German, or Spanish, especially Spanish — but he declined to take advantage of these lingual opportunities. The spirit of contentment within him expressed itself in the consecrated formula :

“Gee, this is bully.”

Wickliff Hershamb knew perfectly well that there were hundreds, even thousands, of citizens of the United States who do not habitually thus express their sense of gratification. He knew also that they always did so in the English romances which introduce American gentlemen to an unsophisticated audience. But he knew further that a great many of them — especially those who used to patronize the *Palacio del Sud* and its dependencies —

did find that it served their turn very satisfactorily when they wished to express their sense of contentment with the amenities of existence.

He was seated in the lounge of the Carlton after luncheon that he had found amazingly satisfactory. He was used to lunching well, but he never wearied of the experience. He was smoking an Emperador that had cost him a pretty penny, but that would have cost most others a great many more pennies, pretty or ill-favoured. He was soothed as he did so by the knowledge that he had brought over ten thousand Emperadores and could survey the question of their consumption with serenity. He was sipping, at intervals, a yellow Chartreuse of a very respectable antiquity. He was looking, critically and approvingly, on pretty, well-dressed women, and portly, well-groomed men. He felt, and looked, very happy. Once again:

“Gee, this is bully.”

A little knot of men came out of the dining-room and halted in a group at the foot of the stairs for a few moments before separating. He had recognized one of them in the room as a fellow-traveller on the boat, and now as the convivial group dissolved into its units he caught his eye and his attention and hailed him with a gesture.

The man thus challenged came over to where the smoker of Emperadores was sitting and nodded a greeting, with the easy affability that transoceanic acquaintanceship begets.

“Hulloa, Hersham,” he said.

“Sit right here,” Wickliff Hersham, his American humour still strong upon him, commanded rather than requested, “and try one of these.”

As he spoke he produced a colossal gold cigar-case

that hopped open at a touch, revealing a double row of Emperadores, magnificent as grenadiers.

The invited man dropped into a chair by Wickliff's table and did as he was bid.

"If it's one of your Emperadores it's not to be refused," he said, and took a cigar at random, knowing from experience that all were excellent. "How's yourself?"

"I'm pretty well," Wickliff conceded cheerfully. He signalled to a waiter, who promptly produced another glass. The new-comer prepared to refuse, but Wickliff was imperative.

"You'll miss something if you don't," he insisted; "it isn't everyone that gets a suck at this stuff. They've only got ten bottles of it left, confound them! and I've commandeered the lot."

The other yielded. Wickliff poured out the golden elixir and watched with approval the expression of his guest's face as he tasted the liquor. "Pretty good, ain't it?"

"It's jolly good," the other admitted readily. He had got used to Wickliff and to Wickliff's ways on board ship, and had liked him, and above all, had liked his Emperadores. Now he liked his yellow Chartreuse.

"It's a rum thing," Wickliff observed philosophically, "that after a voyage one always meets some of one's messmates here and there in the next few days, and after that one probably never sees any of them again."

The other admitted the justice of the reflection.

"I'm glad to have met you again," he affirmed, smiling and waving the great Emperador in the air.

The man who had accepted and was plainly enjoying Wickliff Hersham's hospitality was a man who looked older by some years than his host and very possibly was

not a day older. He was very well dressed in conventional garments that contrasted slightly with Wickliff's simple blue serge suit. He looked soldierly, but he was not now a soldier. His name was Craven Farnell; he was connected with the Intelligence Department, and that's all there is to him so far as this story is concerned.

"You told me a lot of interesting things on board," Wickliff said. "And you seemed to know a devil of a lot that most people haven't an idea of."

Farnell smiled wisely. "My dear fellow," he said, "that's my job. That's what I'm paid for."

"About that 'Verein,' for instance," Wickliff said meditatively. "That International Union, you know."

Farnell's face was still smiling, but his eyes scrutinized Wickliff's face a little more keenly. Apparently he saw nothing there to trouble him, for he answered in an easy voice:

"My dear fellow, I've told you all I know about that business. I wish I knew more, but if I did, to be honest, I shouldn't tell it to you."

Wickliff was indifferent.

"Oh, it just interested me a bit, but I never bother about things that can't be of some definite use to me. Do you know, when I saw you just now I thought that you might be of some use to me at this moment."

Again Farnell's glance at him was keener, and again apparently the placidity of Wickliff's countenance reassured him.

"I shall be delighted if I can be of any use to you," he said, in a pleasant, smooth, non-committal voice. "What's your trouble?"

"Why, it's like this," Wickliff began. He knew that it was asking a favour of a man whom he only knew by virtue of the familiarity of travel to interest himself,

even ever so little, in his affairs. But, after all, an Emperador has its privileges. "I've been away from England for over twenty years."

"You must find it a bit changed," Farnell remarked to fill up time, seeing that Wickliff paused as if uncertain how to continue.

"I find it amazingly changed," Wickliff admitted; "but changed amazingly for the better. This place wasn't going when I left the old country."

And he looked round the lounge with manifest approval.

Farnell gave a swift side glance at the watch on his wrist. "You said there was something I could help you in," he suggested.

"It's a shame to bother you," Wickliff answered. Farnell made a polite gesture of refutation. "Well, here it is. When I left England there was a man I knew; he was only a young fellow like myself. We were great pals. I should like very much to see him again if he is still alive. But I haven't heard from him for fifteen years or so, and I haven't the faintest, dimmest, remotest idea where he is. I was wondering if you could give me a hint as to how I should set about to hunt him up."

"Come, that surely oughtn't to be very difficult," Farnell said, agreeably relieved to find that the service demanded of him was of so slight a nature.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," Wickliff replied. "I thought of going to Scotland Yard, but that seems to be an invidious way of beginning a search for an old pal."

Farnell smiled. "It is perhaps an extreme course," he admitted. "But have you tried the simpler one of consulting the Directory?"

"Yes," said Wickliff; "I couldn't quite let that slip, could I? They have got a Directory in the office yonder and I looked it up this morning, but his name isn't in it. And it isn't a common name either. Winbush the name is."

"No, it's not a common name," Farnell agreed. "If he's not in the Directory, it's probable, though not certain, that he isn't in London. But have you any special reason for believing him to be in London?"

"Only that he always had lived in London," Wickliff answered. "And he always seemed to me the kind of chap that would go on living in London. But it's really a shame of me to trouble you with the matter at all. Only, you see, your being connected with the Intelligence Department——"

"That doesn't necessarily say much," Farnell said modestly; "but it ought to run to some reasonable suggestion. Of course, your friend may be anywhere in England."

"You mean that I might advertise for him?" Wickliff asked as Farnell paused and thought.

"No, I don't mean that," Farnell answered. "He might never see the advertisement, and it might take a long time, even if he did see it in the end——"

"Oh, there's no particular hurry," Wickliff said carelessly. He was inclined, indeed, to wonder a little now at the fuss he was making about finding old Gregory. "Perhaps I had better advertise."

"Let's try something else first," urged Farnell, and he rose to his feet as he spoke. "Come over with me to my club, the Junior Voyagers. It's quite near, in St. James Street. I've got an appointment there at this time as it happens."

"Sorry if I have detained you," Wickliff said, also

getting up, "but how is your club going to help me to find old Winbush?"

"That's the point," Farnell answered. "We've got in our library the directories of every town in England that possesses a directory. If your friend is in England his name ought to be in one of them."

"That seems a pretty good notion," Wickliff said enthusiastically. But the enthusiasm dimmed with quick reflection. "There are a good few towns in England, when you come to think of it."

They were collecting their hats by this time. Farnell smiled. "It will be a kind of lottery," he said. "You might hit on your man in the first half-dozen shots, or you might make several hundred and still draw blank, and you might fail altogether. It's for you to consider how much you want to find him."

"Oh, I want to find him all right," Wickliff replied, though his ardour already was a little damped. "But I can't keep you hanging about all day while I hunt through the books in your club library."

"That will be all right," Farnell assured him. "Our rules permit us to make travellers from antique lands honorary members for a month at a time. As you come from Buenos Ayres, you certainly are a *bonâ-fide* traveller within the meaning of the Act."

By this time they were walking briskly along Pall Mall. The famous thoroughfare looked very attractive in the eyes of the man from the hot lands. It seemed cool and grey and restful in the pleasant faint spring sunshine, contrasting oddly with his vivid memories of the glow and glare over yonder.

"I'm sure it's very kind of you," Wickliff averred. But in his heart he was not rejoicing greatly at the prospect which Farnell was opening out for him. There

were a hundred-and-one more agreeable ways of spending a fair spring day in London than in turning over the pages of provincial directories, even if the process were enriched by the privilege of being made honorary member of the Junior Voyagers. He began to wish he had not said anything about Winbush to his friend of the Intelligence Department. Winbush could very well wait a bit. There really was no immediate hurry about Winbush. However, there was no help for it now, for this afternoon at all events. He promised himself that as soon as Farnell's back was turned he would quietly decamp. But he did not say this. What he said was, "I wish one could have a happy inspiration that would let one pitch on the right place in a jiffy."

"It's not imagination that's wanted," Farnell pronounced. "It's reflection, deduction, elimination. Now, for example, do you think your friend was at all the sort of man to settle down in Scotland, say, or Wales?"

"I certainly do not," Wickliff affirmed. "As a matter of fact I remember that he rather disliked Scotch people on account of a particular man he used to know."

"Your friend seems to have been a man of large views," Farnell commented. "However, his little idiosyncrasy helps us for the moment to employ that elimination I talked of. You needn't bother about Scotland for a bit, anyhow. You could probably eliminate Wales and Ireland, too, in the beginning."

"To tell you the truth," Wickliff responded, "I should have thought Winbush was a man to stop in London, and that's where I made sure of finding him. But that seems to be no go."

By this time they had reached St. James' Street.

Farnell glanced up at the Palace clock and saw with satisfaction that he was well ahead of his appointment. The pair crossed the road in silence, dodging the thronging traffic.

"What about Greater London?" Farnell suggested, when they were across. "Things have grown a bit since you were last in London, and people live much farther afield, and still consider themselves good cockneys, though they might as well hope to hear the bells of Shandon as the bells of Bow. Here we are."

He halted before a handsome, very modern building that towered like a giant on the spot where Wickliff remembered that, in his early days, there had stood a modest dwarf of a house. He followed his friend into a large, cool hall and surrendered his hat.

Farnell wrote his guest's name in the visitors' book. Then he conducted Wickliff towards the lift. "There's another thing we may employ as well as elimination," he said, "and that is radiation. Take London as your centre and radiate. If I were you I should begin with the suburbs."

The lift shot up, and landed them in the neighbourhood of a vast room lined with shelves and loaded with books. This was the library. Wickliff looked at it with some awe and wished he were out again in the sunshine.

"I am afraid Charles Lamb would call most of these the books that are no books," his guide observed, "but some of them will be of more use to you than all the Beaumonts and Fletchers that were ever folioed."

Wickliff did not feel very confident of the identity of Charles Lamb, and he had not the slightest idea who the other gentlemen were or what had been done to them. So he followed Farnell in silence to the far end of the room where the promised directories were

ranged, a heart-breaking army. There was a convenient table and chair.

"Here we are," said Farnell, with a cheerfulness that Wickliff resented. "I will leave you here while I go to get your card of honorary membership made out. Take my advice: Begin your attack upon the suburbs."

CHAPTER II

THE NEEDLE IN THE BUNDLE

LEFT alone in the great club library, Wickliff stared at the shelves of directories with a sense of great depression. He was not really alone, for at most of the many tables in the room sat silent men busy with pens and ink and ponderous volumes. But they did not look companionable. Also, smoking was not permitted in the library.

Farnell returned in a few minutes with the promised card of honorary membership in his hand, the honorary ink scarcely dry upon it. He found Wickliff seated at his table and gazing vacantly at the forbidding treasures.

"Hulloa!" he said. "Haven't you made a start yet?"

Wickliff shook his head.

"I don't know how to begin," he confessed. "It seems such a beast of a job."

"All research is arduous," Farnell moralized. "However, as it happens, I can help you a bit. My man has just telephoned through that he cannot be here for another half hour. So if you like, we will put our heads together and see if we can do a bit of Sherlock."

"Then I shall have to be my dear Watson," Wickliff insinuated, with a faint smile. This time, at least, he did understand what Farnell was talking about.

"Not at all, not at all," Farnell corrected politely.

"Let me see, how shall we begin? Where did your friend live when you knew him?"

"On the south side," Wickliff answered; "in the Newington Butts region."

"Not a very cheerful region," Farnell observed; and Wickliff cordially agreed with him. "Where else did he live?"

"He never lived anywhere else when I knew him," Wickliff answered; "and when I last heard from him he wrote from a house in Clapham."

"Come, I think we are getting on," Farnell observed. "Here we have a friend of yours who seems to have a certain tenacity of taste as to his whereabouts. Forgive me if I ask, but was your friend a man of some means, or did circumstances compel him to keep where he was?"

"He was very well off indeed," Wickliff explained. "If he lived Clapham way it was because he liked Clapham way."

"I see," said Farnell, who was beginning to get quite interested in this hitherto unheard of Winbush. "If he liked Clapham when he was a young man and had the means to live elsewhere, it is probable that he would get fonder, rather than less fond, of that kind of life as he grew older."

Wickliff murmured, "Marvellous, my dear Watson, marvellous!" and Farnell laughed.

"What part of Clapham was he living in when he last wrote to you?" Farnell continued.

"Clapham Common. When he was a boy he always wanted to have a house in Clapham Common; and when he married, just before I left England, he took a large house there."

"Oh, he was married, was he?" The possibility of

a new clue seemed to fascinate the investigator. "Tell me what you know about her. Her predilections may help us."

"She died many years ago," Wickliff replied. "The last communication I had from my friend was the letter announcing her death."

"Oh!" exclaimed Farnell, rather disappointed of being checked in a line of inquiry which he had hoped to find profitable. "Well, there's no help in that direction. So he liked Clapham Common, did he? But you say he is not there now?"

"No, he's not there now," Wickliff answered. "That house has been pulled down long ago and they've built flats on it."

"They are invaders," Farnell commented. "Well, if your friend liked Clapham Common, and your friend has been driven from Clapham Common by the desecrating hand of the jerry-builder, and we proceed on the assumption that he retains his inclination for the suburban life, I should think our wisest course would be first to consider those suburbs which are associated with commons."

The reasoning appeared to Wickliff to be very sound. He sincerely hoped that it might prove to be well founded. He would be glad to have the matter settled. But it was kind of Farnell to take so much trouble, and he was amused by his zeal. It really wasn't a bad kind of game, trying to puzzle out Winbush in this way, if it didn't last too long.

"Let us just run through the list of them," Farnell continued, and he rattled off a string of names glibly—Balham, Barnes, Brindling, Mitcham, Tooting, Sheen Wandsworth, Wimbledon. "Is there anything in the sound of any one of those names which suggests to you

any reason why your friend should have selected it for a residence?"

There certainly was not, to Wickliff's unfamiliar ears. He had not known very much about London when he quitted it twenty odd years earlier. He knew still less about it now that it had undergone so many changes. The names that Farnell had enumerated meant nothing to him, and he said so.

"Let me see," Farnell said, reflecting. "Clapham Commons suggests old-fashioned comfort and ease. There are still several others like that. This place, for example."

He selected a volume from the shelves that were devoted to the directories of London and its environs and handed it to Wickliff. Wickliff glanced rapidly at the short list of names under "W." Winbush was not among them. He said so, and Farnell's face fell a little. It was evident that he had hoped to hit the gold in the first fire. He meditated for a moment and made a second selection with a similar lack of success. A third choice proved equally unsatisfactory. Farnell frowned.

"Either my theory is entirely wrong," he said, "or our missing friend is more ambitious than I gave him credit for. We will try something a bit more swagger this time."

Again he picked a volume from the shelves and handed it to Wickliff. It was the volume devoted to a very ancient and honourable suburb, which thought a great deal of itself—the suburb of Brindling. Wickliff took the volume in a bored humour. He was getting tired of the game. He opened the book listlessly, fluttered the pages to the end of the alphabet, drearily scanned the column under "W." There in another

moment he saw this entry: "Winbush Gregory, Tennis-Court House."

Wickliff gave a shout that pealed victory into Farnell's ears. "By Jove! we've got it!" he exulted, and showed the open page to Farnell, who almost purred with gratification.

"What did I tell you?" he asked triumphantly. "Elimination, deduction, radiation. There you are. Well, I congratulate you cordially on having found your old friend."

"I don't believe I ever should have found him if it hadn't been for you," Wickliff declared honestly. "I cannot tell you how much I am obliged to you. Will you dine with me to-night?"

Farnell shook his head. He was amused at this somewhat rough-and-ready way of rewarding him for his services, which indeed had been their own reward as far as he was concerned. But he did not show any amusement, for he knew that Wickliff's offer was simple and straightforward.

"Sorry," he said affably, "but I'm booked."

"Perhaps another night?" Wickliff hazarded.

"I shall be delighted," Farnell declared, and the phrase was not over-exaggeration, for he had found Wickliff an interesting study. "Especially if your supply of Emperadores is holding out."

"You bet it is," said Wickliff.

"Although we have solved the problem of the missing Winbush," Farnell went on, "I hope you will still continue to take advantage of your honorary membership. They do us pretty well here, and our cellar is not without its merits. You must lunch with me one day and test it."

Wickliff thanked him cordially. At that moment one

of the club servants entered the room, and advancing towards Farnell, informed him that a gentleman was waiting for him downstairs. Farnell turned to Wickliff.

"Sorry," he said, "but I must leave you now. Will you stay here, or will you come downstairs?"

Wickliff, who, now that he had gained his information, was heartily sick of the library, opted instantly for the latter course, and went towards the lift with Farnell. They parted in the hall with renewed promises to meet again, and Wickliff passed out into St. James' Street. As he walked slowly towards Piccadilly, tasting the bright, clean sunlight, he murmured to himself: "Tennis-Court House." Thereafter he added an ejaculatory "By Jove!"

CHAPTER III

A SUBURBAN RESIDENCE

THE serious student of London in the twentieth century will have perforce to be pedestrian if he wish to know anything of the city. The art of civic exploration is none too easy to practise in an age when people hurry madly under the earth or drive madly upon it with frenzy gainable from electricity or petrol, or fly madly over it in aeroplanes or dirigible balloons. But it is an art that must be practised by our imaginary student if he be as serious as we hope, and really desirous to know his London as his London should be known. He will have to follow the example of Stow, that sturdy old Tudor tailor and chronicler, who could not ride, but who could and did walk, and who was so proud of being called the "Antiquary of England" that he deemed himself "worthy of that title for his pains." He will have to follow the example set him by Mercier, the chronicler of Paris in the eighteenth century, who declared, with a whimsical sense of humour and a whimsical sense of truth, that he wrote his famous "Pictures of Paris" with his feet.

The modern student will have a wider area to study than ever the Frenchman had, for London was larger than Paris in Mercier's day, and London now is as a mammoth compared to the London which Cobbett saw and eyed with such disfavour a hundred years ago, labelling it a wen on the face of England. Our student

will have to study, not merely London the great city, London the great town, but also there must lie before his tireless energy and unflagging feet the vast girdle of the suburbs. When Cobbett lampooned London these same suburbs were smiling country places, steeped in a pleasing rusticity, areas of ample fields, rich orchards, pleasant hedge-rows, great trees and thick grasses, noble environs of the monstrous, greedy capital that was so soon to engulf them. The tragic passion of man for desecrating the sanctuaries of nature is more disastrous to sylvan simplicity than the trampling of many battles. For when the smoke of conflict has blown away the rural deities easily resume their sway, and grass grows and birds sing above the battered trenches. But the march of the citizen upon the green places which are part of the kingdom of Pan never retreats; there is no recovery for the wounded earth from the injuries he inflicts. Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard, street by street, the invasion of brick and mortar carries desolation into the rustic places and such divinities and fairies as may have haunted their greenness flee in terror before the hideous encroachment.

One is given to speaking with a vague generality of "the suburbs" as if one such spot were much the same as another. Many of them are ugly with an appalling ugliness, places where it is tragic to think that any tenants could consent to dwell, dreadful acres of dreary hives and meaningless kennels. These have a meanness which is almost magnificent in its detestable success. The volcano's lava could not more completely obliterate all evidence of the fact that such houses and such streets were once the kindly and lovely countryside.

It is a far cry from the London of the second decade of the twentieth century to the London—

"Small and white and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green,"

that was so living and so visible to the poet of the "Earthly Paradise." There are horrors enough in London proper, places of foulness and of danger, through which our imaginary pedestrian must surely go warily, with a constable at his side, and should, wisely, go with a physician. These places are the diseased tissue of the wen; they cry shame upon all conceivable governments that consent to exist contemporarily. But their hideousness is as the hideousness of the Pit of Hell, to be exterminated, as we may suppose, sooner or later by the angels. It presents a medical, an ethical problem; it asserts a sore to be cut away.

But there are places about London, agglomerations of wickedly-laid brick, that call for no revolution of righteousness to uproot them, and yet that are little less than terrific in their power of ugliness. The creator of "Alice" was a wise man when he enriched the language with the word "to uglify." These dismal outposts uglify London to a staggering degree. These streets, these houses, commit, indeed, no offence in their structure against public decency or public morals, or except indirectly against public health, and yet they must have their blighting effect upon the human beings that dwell in them, that see them daily, that have their minds trained to tacit and even thankful acceptance of such monotonous monstrosities.

Our fanciful pedestrian, writing his record of London with his feet, is to be pitied in those of his peregrinations where he comes face to face with certain of the gaunt awfulnesses, the black and red tragedies of life. But he needs pity, in a less degree, perhaps, but

still sorely, if he have any sense of man's spiritual needs, as he drags himself along some of the streets of some of London's suburbs. Here are streets with no visible anguish to wring the soul, and yet their existence forces the visitor to reflect that this is what, as it were yesterday, man in a civilized country has been permitted to offer man in exchange for meadows and gardens, woods and parks, bird-haunted coppices, and the hallowed greens of ancient villages. If humanity at last, and after infinite pains, regains a lost sense of beauty in some such Utopia as Morris dreamed of yesterday, and as Wells dreams of to-day, it is conceivable that the fool who built such houses would be held to be scarcely less criminal or imbecile than the knave who fitted them with defective drainage.

But what is true of certain suburbs is not true of all suburbs. Our imaginary traveller can cleanse his spirit from the memory of such unclean things in regions so far favoured of fortune that they may still be deemed delectable.

Here in these happy haunts are groves amid which on a windy day the fine ear can catch the music of the pipes of Pan through the tossing branches. Here are stretches of free land that wear a prairie vastness by reason of their nearness to the greedy town. Here are cool ponds, amiable planes of pale water haunted by birds and tempting to the launching of toy argosies. Here are broad white highways rolling boldly, noble roads that might lead to regions of adventure or delight. Here still are ancient houses that once were country residences, and that still retain their air of rural seclusion, though they threshold a giant city. It is well for London that she can still wear these jewels in her mural crown.

Such a suburb is Brindling, lying on the edge of its famous common. It is a vastly respectable suburb, abounding in wealthy residents, whose dwellings ape for stateliness the country houses of the really great and good. Some of these houses are handsome, or almost handsome, having gained with the growth in architecture of the later nineteenth century. Others, comfortable enough inside, are ugly enough externally, with the unmitigated ugliness of early Victorian buildings. But, besides these newer houses, there still linger in the neighbourhood of the common a few dwellings reminiscent of the days when that common was open country, and when a scarlet coat discernible on its green surface would have been taken not for the mark of the golfer, but for the habit of the highwayman.

These houses stand apart—shy, retiring, and with a quiet dignity—from the more blatant of their surroundings. They recall in their line of gable and pane of window a calmer day and more spacious leisure. They are, as it were, suffused with the graciousness of the past; the suavity of their lines is restful; they have the grave majesty of buildings fashioned solidly to endure. They are for the most part of the late eighteenth century; some few are of the early nineteenth century before that century had surrendered to ugliness; but the eighteenth century ones are the best. They are haunted, of course, to the imaginative with ghosts in coloured coats and flowered gowns, and as you wander in the old-fashioned gardens, redolent of sweet scents and pleasing pungencies, you begin to fancy that you ought to feel eager for the latest news of the French wars. Some of these houses lie hidden away, cloistered behind high walls; some smile cheerfully on the roadway through no more forbidding a boundary than a painted railing.

Of these delightful houses, Tennis-Court House was, perhaps, for many reasons the most delightful. It was trebly desirable for the beauty of the building, for the charm and quaintness of its antique garden, and for the associations that hung round the dwelling, and lent to it a perfume more fragrant than the scent of rose-leaves embalmed in odorous spices. A great painter had lived there for a season, whose pictures of lovely women are the adored of succeeding years. A great sailor had passed there the evening of his days—one that had made the North-West passage, and fought with the Arctic rigours, and had dreamed, not unreasonably, of planting the flag of England upon the Northern Pole. Here were great ghosts, indeed, to haunt the noble house. Their latest successor, indeed, was a prosperous wine merchant, who, as he grew more prosperous, sighed for a residence that should be, as he put it, more "up-to-date." The consequence of this wish was a change of hands and the present proprietorship.

CHAPTER IV

'A SUBURBAN RESIDENT

IT has to be admitted frankly that the new resident at the old Tennis-Court House was not at all more appropriate to his surroundings than his predecessor—the great City wine-merchant. Even he was less appropriate, for, at least, the City merchant had good wine to sell—when he had customers that really knew one wine from another—and the great painter had loved good wine very kindly. There the tradition broke, for the great sailor was a vehement abstainer, and quarrelsome on the subject over his empty cups, and the great wine-merchant was dyspeptic and limited for the most part to lime-water. As for the new proprietor, a little weak whisky-and-soda was what he called his “tipple” at meals, and his “night-cap” at bed-time. The grand associations were ebbing swiftly from the ancient place.

The new-comer did not care—again it is his phrase—a brass farthing for his predecessors. He cared little for the great sailor, for he had always a queasy stomach, which betrayed him shamefully on his rare marine adventures. He cared even less for the great painter who convulsed his generation by his worship of a single face; but he would have considered him the most interesting of his predecessors, for in his youth the new proprietor had been something of a sentimentalist, with an admiration for pretty faces, especially as depicted in the pictorial advertisements of the feminine journals. Mr. Winbush—Mr. Gregory Winbush—had chosen his house

not because it was beautiful, nor because it was sanctified by sweet and tender memories, but because it was quiet, and because it stood aloof from the roar and bustle of the world.

Mr. Winbush descended upon Brindling unheeded. No one noticed the fact that a pink-faced individual with a frizzle of gingery hair was fussing about the neighbourhood, flitting from house-agent to house-agent, and exploring, single-handed and adventurous, the by-ways of the place. Mr. Winbush knew what he wanted himself quite well; he wanted a house in that suburb, and he wanted a house that was suitable for the Purpose. The desires might not be easy to combine, but Mr. Winbush was convinced that they were combinable. To live on the edge of a common had been the dream of his youth, and he had realized his dream and been driven from his Eden, and now hoped to find a new home in the desirable suburb of Brindling. But life in that desirable suburb must, for Mr. Winbush, be coupled with service of the Purpose. To the Purpose all things must be surrendered, even the pleasure of living in a house on the edge of a common.

Mr. Winbush was unwearied in his researches. He investigated smug houses with half a century of comfort engrained in their composition; he investigated houses that seemed created for no other purpose than to show what domestic architecture ought never to attempt; he investigated houses that were cunning imitations of the houses of a bygone day, and that differed from them mainly in a generosity of bath-rooms. He investigated houses that were almost falling into decay; he investigated houses that were so raw and crude in their square of unreclaimed desert that they seemed too bad to be true.

For a long time none of them, old or new, ripe or raw, jumped with Mr. Winbush's purpose. Then suddenly to the seeker came the sought. In a quiet road that was almost as lonely as a lane, and yet was as close as close to the common, Mr. Winbush came upon Tennis-Court House, and saw that it was good, and saw, too, that it had an appanage that could be conveniently employed for the interests of the Purpose. That appanage was the feature which gave its name to the house—the famous tennis-court. There were few houses in England when Mr. Winbush came to his suburb—there are fewer now—which could boast of the possession of a tennis-court. There are millions of excellent people, of whom Mr. Winbush was one, to whom the word "tennis" suggests a game on grass or asphalt within certain chalk lines played by lads and lasses in suburban back gardens, or by champions of world-shaking fame at the Queen's Club or Princes', or Monte Carlo, or in the country palace of some American millionaire. Therefore, when Mr. Winbush beheld the famous tennis-court, which was esteemed by the expert to be better than its rival at Hampton Court, it was with no sense of gratification at the possibility of playing the most complicated game in the world under the most favourable conditions that he slapped his lean leg, and assured himself that he had found at last the very thing that he had been looking for. There was nothing whatever to indicate that the property was in the market, but Mr. Winbush in the course of his peregrinations had by this time learned enough worldly wisdom to know this fact was not necessarily a convincing proof that the property was not in the market. He scurried off to the house-agent's and made inquiries. The house-agent stated that Tennis-Court House was not on his books; but he added that

he had heard a rumour that its present owner would not be altogether unwilling to part with it. At Mr. Winbush's suggestion the house-agent made certain inquiries, and those inquiries produced satisfactory responses. Thereafter the adventurous quest ended in his lawyer's offices with signing of agreements and cheques, and it left Mr. Winbush the unquestioned and untrammeled proprietor of Tennis-Court House.

Brindling was first made aware of the arrival of Mr. Winbush by the ravages which it pleased him to make in his newly-acquired property in order to erect a temple to his Purpose. The first thing that Mr. Winbush had done on obtaining possession was to call in the services of a local builder, and quite ruthlessly to destroy associations which had been respected by the dyspeptic wine-merchant. An army of carpenters and bricklayers under Mr. Winbush's personal directions, gutted the tennis-court of its appurtenances, fitted it up to be of service as a workman's shed, and linked it with zealous vandalism to the hall of the main building by an ugly corridor of corrugated iron, which was entered—by Mr. Winbush and no one else—through a steel door with a special lock, presumably inviolable, of which Mr. Winbush alone possessed the key. The name "Tennis-Court House" still remained on the front gate, but the tennis-court itself, degraded to the seeming of an out-house or a workshop, or a laboratory, was as if it had never been. This workshop was the shrine of Mr. Winbush's life. Within its lofty walls he passed the most part of each day, and often a large part of each night, in his impassioned devotion to his Purpose.

The news soon spread—as such gossip will in such a place—that a stranger to the neighbourhood had settled *down in one of its most ancient and famous houses*, and

was, as it were, making hay of its beauties. The Vicar, brisk in instincts of visitation, called upon the new-comer and was received none too amiably.

He found, and reported—for the good man was a bit of a wag—that his new parishioner was a small, alert, fussy personage, with a round bald head that was fringed with a few remains of the sandy hair that had attached to it in the days of his youth. His appearance suggested to his visitor more the character of a retired tradesman—and for choice the Vicar suggested a grocer—than a person of independent means, devoted to scientific pursuits. His face was one of those faces which, never looking very young, even in extreme youth, do not seem ever to grow very old. It was small and round and pinched and rather wrinkled; but the Vicar felt sure that it must have been small and round and pinched and rather wrinkled ever since Winbush had looked at himself in a mirror. He had small, bird-like motions. Bird-like he flapped his arms as if they were wings, and he walked in a bird-like fashion, with brisk little struts, and when he talked or listened to another talking he cocked his head on one side in an inquiring, bird-like attitude. For the rest he wore quite commonplace clothes in a quite commonplace manner, and his hands and nails were soiled with the signs of recent manual labour.

The Vicar did not find his brief interview very satisfactory. His inquiries concerning the religious direction of Mr. Winbush's intelligence elicited the statement that Mr. Winbush was a Plymouth Brother. As a matter of fact, Mr. Winbush was nothing of the kind; but as there was no place of worship dedicated to the Plymouth Brotherhood in the suburb, the invention served the turn, without being as fantastic and improbable as the

assertion that Mr. Winbush was a Buddhist or a Shintoist, a Mahomedan or a Parsee, and Mr. Winbush, brimming with satisfaction, ushered the Vicar out with astonishing celerity. After that a few people called, and were invariably informed that Mr. Winbush was not at home. In a little while it was quite plain even to the most social and companionable of the local gentry that Mr. Winbush did not want the attentions of his neighbours.

Those neighbours accepted Mr. Winbush's attitude composedly enough, and took him on his own terms, very cheerfully allowing him to be a hermit, and to lead his own life unvexed by importunity. They had plenty to do with their lives without troubling themselves about somebody who did not want to be troubled about. The lives of well-to-do residents of Brindling are so gloriously full that they have no time to think of anything but themselves and their speculations, and their cellars and their motor-cars, and their general respectabilities and their occasional hum-drum adulteries that sometimes become for a season lurid in the divorce court and stop-press news.

It was a wonderful world, this world into which Mr. Winbush had intruded, a world that was half Sleepy Hollow and half a sham Belgravia, a world that had not yet been properly explored and mapped out, and that, if it does not call for, at least deserves, its Marco Polo, its Mungo Park, its Stanley. Men waste their lives in exploring the sources of Ethiopic rivers who would be infinitely better employed in the consideration of Tooting Bec. Therefore Mr. Winbush was left free to follow out his Purpose, whatever it might be—some asserted that Mr. Winbush went in for a little mild tunnery in his transmuted tennis-court—for long enough without ques-

tion or visitation. Nobody knew where he came from, and those who tried to find out, met with no more than disappointment, for Mr. Winbush chose to be a recluse, and was soon accepted as an uninteresting mystery. In fact, had he been absolutely a hermit for the rest of his days, Brindling would have troubled very little about him.

But after a time Mr. Winbush was no longer absolutely a hermit. He came to have a companion in that ancient house. That companion was never permitted to cross the threshold of the temple to the Purpose, and that companion was Mr. Winbush's daughter. It was because of Mr. Winbush's daughter that Brindling, or at least some of the inhabitants of Brindling, took a revived interest in Mr. Winbush.

CHAPTER V

THE RESIDENT'S DAUGHTER

A SLIM, dark, bright-eyed, graceful girl suddenly slipped into Brindling and the antique charm of Tennis-Court House—a school-girl, all short skirts and long hair, home for the holidays from a seaside school. This first appearance was transitory, its influence upon the suburb brief, if not ineffective. Those that saw the child—the men, at least—thought her delightful to look at; inquired about her identity, and were surprised to learn that she was the daughter of the mystery of Tennis-Court House. Before their surprise had time to lessen the girl had vanished again, back to the seaside school and its “crocodiles” and its unimaginable foolishness. These appearances and disappearances happened at stated intervals for a while. Then there came a time when she returned with her kirtle elongated and her hair up, and this time she returned to stay.

Mr. Winbush, daily more and more absorbed in the Purpose, and daily less disposed to waste any time in the cares of housekeeping, had suddenly decided that he would like to have her at home. She was nearly seventeen, he reflected, and quite old enough to look after him—this being Mr. Winbush's ancient-of-days attitude towards the relation of woman to man, an attitude which he maintained in the teeth of experience, and which he hoped that his daughter, taken young enough, would be ready to accept.

The girl's coming made Tennis-Court House once more a centre of curiosity. Who the late Mrs. Winbush was—for it was assumed likely that Mrs. Winbush was a thing of the past—nobody knew. Those who looked at Mr. Winbush's daughter, and contrasted her rare freshness with the pale-countenanced plainness of Mr. Winbush, and her long-limbed comeliness with Mr. Winbush's meagre and insignificant presence, decided that the late Mrs. Winbush must undoubtedly have had a more than pleasing appearance.

Local opinion was promptly divided in most parliamentary fashion into a Government and an Opposition. The Government was entirely composed of women, the Opposition entirely composed of men. The question which thus divided the society of the suburb in a sex-strife was as to whether the addition of a daughter to the "Tennis-Court" household suggested or did not suggest the desirability of making any further amiable assaults upon Mr. Winbush's privacy.

The men unanimously thought that it did, and expressed that opinion loudly when they met together at the golf club and the Empire Club, and the Brindling Club, where the girl was much discussed and belauded. They hinted it timidly in their home-circles with an eagerness which they did their best to mask with an air of indifference.

The women, on the other hand, sniffing suspiciously at the hintings of their men-folk, decided, after much informal discussion over afternoon teas, that the appearance of a pretty girl at Tennis-Court House was emphatically not an event of sufficient social importance to call for any renewed attempt to invade a privacy of which Mr. Winbush appeared to be so jealous.

Accordingly no such attempts were made, and the

seclusion of Tennis-Court House remained as complete as ever Mr. Winbush could have desired or Mr. Winbush's daughter dreaded. Indeed, if Brindling society could have known all the facts, it probably would have agreed that the girl was somewhat to be pitied, living alone in an ancient house with a prematurely elderly gentleman, always self-absorbed and occasionally fretful, who passed the greater part of his waking hours shut up in the devastated tennis-court, and who had recalled his daughter from the demi-delights and demi-semi-possibilities of her school-life, in order that he might have the more money to devote to his eternal Purpose. The family of Bernard de Palissy probably had a trying time of it, and Mr. Winbush's pretty daughter would probably have sympathized with them, had she but known—which she did not—that they ever existed. The people who serve a Purpose are often, though not always, a blessing to the world at large, but they are very often far from being a blessing to their world in little.

There were, most unhappily, thousands of girls in England at that hour who would have thought the position of Gregory Winbush's daughter enviable beyond the power of words. To be housed, to be clothed, to be fed, as Winbush's daughter was housed, clothed and fed, would seem to such to be little less than the top of earthly felicity. You can see the gaunt, hungry faces; you can hear the piteous whimperings of the miserable beings whose existence makes civilization ridiculous.

But all envies and desires in life are relative, and the leg of mutton on the pinnacle of the greased pole is not temptation to the well-filled belly. There certainly were hundreds of girls in England who would have thought the daily existence of Winbush's daughter very pitiful indeed. To such as we now think of, accustomed

to many meals in the duration of a day, familiar with fine clothes, accepting cleanliness and comfort and soft sleep as the recognized essentials of existence, the girl who had these things, the common birthright of girls who counted, and had only these things, was extremely unfortunate.

Indeed, judged by any higher standard of life than that which satisfies the bodily wants, the Winbush girl may be agreed unfortunate. She lived in a populous and fashionable suburb, and was as lonely as Selkirk in his island, or Anthony in the Thebaid. Her only companions were a preoccupied father, whom she seldom saw, and the domestic servants. She had to spend long hours by herself, hours which she could only fill with slatternly needlework as useless to others as hateful to herself, with the reading of cheap novels purchased at the railway station out of her moderate pocket-money, and with lonely walks in the town or on the common. In the course of these walks she exchanged glances with many an admiring youth and elder, but she did not dare to form chance acquaintances, much as she longed to do so, partly for fear of a hot-tempered, misanthropic parent, and partly because of some vague idea inherited from the school-days of the importance of being respectable.

Truly, the girl, condemned to a dreary isolation, would be pronounced pitiable; truly, Gregory Winbush, absorbed in his purpose, would be pronounced selfish by any one with knowledge of the facts. But no one did know the facts except the father and daughter, neither of them impartial critics of the other's conduct. While the father, absorbed in the Purpose, was indifferent to all things else in Heaven or Earth, the poor girl was bored to extinction. She was very vehemently alive;

she was keenly conscious of the prettiness of her face and the shapeliness of her body; she was keenly desirous of companionship, especially, thanks to her inherited temperament, of male companionship. Naturally she fretted in her desperate isolation, saturating her spirit with that sense of despair which sits so naturally upon the shoulders of seventeen, when seventeen finds herself governed by uncomfortable conditions.

It were idle to speculate as to what would have happened had this state of things persisted, even though the fanciful problem may have its whimsical attractions, for this state of things did not persist. Just when the girl's budding womanhood was most distressed by the dreariness of her environment, and most troubled by the stirring pulses of youth, just as her fancy, inflamed by the study of cheap novels and unwholesome meditations on their meaning, dallied with all manner of rebellious imaginings, just at this moment something happened which seemed to the girl little less than a miracle. Had a god emerged from his machine in flame of fire or glory of gold, had some angelic ally descended from another planet to comfort her in her trouble, the astounding visitation could not have been more welcome to her than the coming of Wickliff Hersham.

CHAPTER VI

THE COMING OF WICKLIFF

MR. WINBUSH had converted the inner hall of the beautiful old house he occupied into a kind of general living-room. It opened on to the garden through large French windows, which from spring to autumn afforded a view of shifting and vivid colour, and in winter, while the light lasted, an agreeable perspective of winter greens. From the back of this hall sprang the stately staircase that conducted to a landing and thence to the other apartments of the dwelling. Mr. Winbush was far from being what is called artistic, but he had a very decided sense of the difference between being comfortable and being uncomfortable, and the hall, like the rest of the house, was furnished after a fashion that made on the whole for ease if scarcely for graciousness.

A captious critic would have described the chairs and the tables, the sofas and the china-cases, as being very flagrantly mid-Victorian, and so in truth they were, pompous and heavy things enough of walnut and mahogany, pompously and heavily covered and upholstered. But they served their purpose of being sat upon and eaten from creditably enough, and what more, Mr. Winbush would probably have demanded, if anyone had been rude enough to comment upon his surroundings, what more could you ask from chairs and tables than comfort and convenience?

Given comfort and convenience, Mr. Winbush asked little more of his domestic surroundings. But Mr. Winbush's daughter, being a woman, and being young and being pretty, liked to have pretty things, or the things she thought pretty, about her; and when she had attained sufficient ascendancy over her parent, she was at pains to have them.

It was she who brightened up the large hall-room with a cheerful carpet. It was she who saw that the gaunt French windows were draped in summer with cool white laces and in winter with warm flowered cretonnes. It was she who gathered great armfuls of flowers from the luxuriance of the garden, and stuck her posies and beau-pots all over the place in large gaily-tinted jars and bowls. It was she who adorned mantelpiece and piano and side-tables and writing-desk with the photographs and picture-postcards of innumerable actors and actresses, generally heroes and heroines of the newest musical comedy, something to the astonishment of Mr. Winbush, who peered at them in a mystified way whenever he came up against them. He had never heard of any of these players, and could hardly be brought to understand what a musical comedy was, though a keen observer might have noticed that he always winced a little at any allusion to a music-hall.

Such was the room in which, during the day, Mr. Winbush made his infrequent appearances on his way to and from his workshop. Such was the room in which Mr. Winbush's daughter reigned a lonely queen. This was the room which had in the wall that fringed the garden the steel door which communicated by means of the Vandal corridor with the transmuted tennis-court.

On a pleasant morning of early spring Mr. Gregory *Winbush* was standing in this room and in a meditative

mood. He had just come from his breakfast—a meal which was always of a simplicity that would command the approval of an anchorite—and in accordance with his usual habit at once would have hurried to serve the Purpose in the metamorphosed tennis-court. But to-day he stood at the window staring into the garden. His daughter was in the garden gathering flowers, for Mr. Winbush preferred to be left alone at breakfast, a preference which his daughter cheerfully respected, as Mr. Winbush was inclined to be a little fretful in the freshness of the day. But Mr. Winbush was not looking at, or thinking of, his daughter. The morning paper was in his hand; but the morning paper was unheeded, for Mr. Winbush was entirely absorbed in his reflections, and cared nothing for the conduct of his planet. He had been kept awake for a large part of the night by some problem in connection with the Purpose, and he now preferred to muse over the difficulty where he was, before attempting to grapple with it in its temple. Mr. Winbush frowned and grunted, Mr. Winbush frowned and sighed. It was at this singularly inopportune moment that the door opened, and Mr. Winbush's maid-servant entered the room, defying the conventions of the house, and disturbing the speculations of its owner. Mr. Winbush maintained a very small establishment, consisting of an elderly cook and a youthful housemaid, who, between them, were expected to manage the domestic affairs of Tennis-Court House, with assistance from outside on one day in the week. At one time Mr. Winbush had kept a man-servant, but he had given him up for the sake of economy. It was understood that Mr. Winbush was only to be approached by his servants through the medium of his daughter. Surprised and irritated by a breach of the sacred regulations, Mr. Win-

bush looked round with a frown, and snapped out an angry interrogation: "What the devil do you want?" was what Mr. Winbush thought, and even what Mr. Winbush said.

The girl was apparently conscious of her temerity, and the form of the interrogation did not appear to be unexpected. Standing inside the room with one hand on the door-handle, she said with a mixture of diffidence and determination that there was a gentleman in the outer hall who was anxious to see Mr. Winbush. Mr. Winbush promptly rapped out the answer that he was not in the least anxious to see any gentleman in the hall or elsewhere, and he forcefully instructed the girl to say that he was engaged.

The girl swiftly disappeared, but Mr. Winbush's indignation was scarcely given time to cool, before she appeared again with pale resolution on her face. Mr. Winbush glared at her, but the girl stood her ground, and seemed prepared to brave her master's irritation. The gentleman, it seemed, declined to accept the statement of Mr. Winbush's engagement as a reason for departure; the gentleman, it seemed, had assured the maid that Mr. Winbush would be very glad to see him.

Mr. Winbush snarled out the perfectly true statement that he was never anxious to see anyone, and then, as the remark did not have the effect of causing the maid to vanish, he further asked if the intruder had given his name.

The maid shook her head. "He said he wouldn't give no name," she answered, "but that he knew you would be glad to see him." So far the girl, repeating faithfully her message. She kept to herself discreetly the reasons that had made her so steadfast a messenger, the hearty kiss that the stranger had given her, and the

sovereign that he had slipped into her hand. Mr. Winbush was now a lively pink with indignation.

"Tell the gentleman," he shouted, "that he can go to the devil."

Mr. Winbush delivered his angry command, and seemed to think that the pestilent intruder was done with for good and all. But the neat maid-servant lingered reluctant, timidly fingered the door-knob, visibly eager to forward the stranger's cause. Mr. Winbush stared at her, but instead of retreating before his indignant gaze, she actually advanced towards him, to his surprise, and, indeed, to her own surprise.

This unexpected advance was not due to her own volition. While she delayed and hesitated, eager and yet afraid to speak, she found herself firmly impelled forward into the room, by the steady pressure of the door behind her. As she gave way before the unseen and unexpected insistence, the aperture widened sufficiently to admit the ingress of a human body, and a man boldly entered the room; the man whom she had left standing in the hall a few minutes before. The newcomer was a sturdily-built fellow of middle height, who carried himself so alertly and aired so well-preserved a geniality, that it was difficult to assign his exact relationship to middle-age. The intruder was dressed in a well-made suit of blue serge, which somehow conveyed the impression of a kind of uniform, an habitual vestment, a form of apparel deliberately chosen and definitely adhered to. A soft plush hat, of a dark green hue, perched jauntily on his head, seemed so much a portion and parcel of his attired being as almost not to seem improper in a suburban parlour. The man's liking for blue asserted itself anew in a striped white and blue shirt and a plain dark blue tie. His clean-shaven, resolute face was sun-

burned to a deep brown, and from the tan that accentuated their colour, his keen eyes smiled mischievously.

"Don't tell me to go to the devil," he said cheerfully. "I have just quitted one of his kingdoms, and find old England cool and pleasant for a change."

The resentful frown on Mr. Winbush's face had deepened as the cheerful blue-garbed stranger invaded the room with the air of one who was perfectly certain of welcome. But as the stranger spoke, an old familiarity with the sound of his voice changed Mr. Winbush's wrathful expression first to one of puzzlement, then of wonder, which finally widened into a smile of delighted recognition. He scrambled to his feet with great alacrity and advanced with extended hands.

"Wickliff," he cried, "Wickliff!" and there was a more joyous tone in his speech than the maid had yet been privileged to hear.

"Good old Gregory," the new-comer responded with a jolly laugh, as the hands of the two men met and clasped. The maid disappeared from the room, confident that she had worthily earned her sovereign and her salute.

CHAPTER VII

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

THE two men that had thus been so suddenly and unexpectedly brought together, made a curious contrast as they stood there facing each other in the great room that had once made a stately frame for the stately figures of a stately age. Winbush's small, meagre, wizened figure seemed to bulk even less substantial than it was in the ill-fitting, sloppy yellow drill suit, stained and smeared with oil and ink, which he wore in his workshop and which, in consequence, he wore in his house until the moment came at evening for locking the workshop door and leaving the Purpose alone for the time being. His small, blinking, red-lidded, weakish eyes peered with a kind of fierce wistfulness at his visitor. As he stood there, poised in something of a reproachful, doubtful attitude, he suggested vaguely the appearance of an amiable canary-bird that was doing its best to pass muster as a hawk.

Wickliff Hersham was not a day younger than Winbush, but he might have passed, to a casual observer, for Winbush's son, in his alert, well-preserved assertion of youthfulness. His face might have been the face of a cynical philosopher, it might have been the face of a worldly ecclesiastic; it was a whimsical amalgam, compounded partly of the patience of a Buddhist and partly of the readiness of a master-mariner. From the ruddy tan of his countenance his keen eyes surveyed his flustered host with a kindly and ironic smile that seemed at

once to appraise and to excuse humorously. His sensual mouth asserted a keen appreciation of the joys of life, and there was an air of content in his whole carriage which suggested very definitely that he had tasted of them with genuine enjoyment. His strong brown hands, having done their duty of enthusiastically clasping the lean, yellow fingers of Winbush, were thrust deep, with a cheery air of good-fellowship and self-reliance, into the pockets of his jacket. No one with the faintest knowledge of the world and of humanity, not even Winbush, whose acquaintance with both was limited and perfunctory, could look on him and fail to appreciate that here was a man who, like Ulysses, had seen men and cities, and who, like Ulysses, had contrived to profit very considerably by his knowledge of both. Good-humoured bluffness, joviality, a kind of sea-faring heartiness, were the colours which Wickliff Hersham flew, perhaps a little ostentatiously. Behind the jolly-doggishness, the cordiality, the hail-fellow-well-met frankness and affability, a shrewder observer than Gregory Winbush might have been pleased to believe that his intelligence read the strength, the steadfastness and the inexorable purpose that enabled a selfish man to go far. So the men remained, the first heat of their greeting cooled, opposite to each other, physically opposed to each other. If Winbush, with the wing-like angle of his awkward elbows, suggested a bird, Hersham, resolute and squarely set, suggested some sturdy dog.

"Well, old Greg," Wickliff asked joyously. "Are you surprised to see me?"

Winbush blinked at him, pleased and puzzled.

"I certainly am," he admitted. "I thought you were in South America. Sit down."

It was a great tribute to Mr. Winbush's visitor that

his host should show so much readiness for his society as to give his work the go-by in this genial fashion. Wickliff did not appreciate the magnitude of Winbush's sacrifice, but he accepted his invitation and took a chair. Winbush followed his example, and the two men sat facing each other, studying each other intently.

"I was in South America a month ago," Wickliff said. "Then one fine morning it came suddenly into my head that I should like to see England again. I always humour my whims whenever I can afford to do so, and here I am."

Winbush slowly rubbed his hands together, a sign of satisfaction in him.

"Capital," he murmured, "capital! But how did you ever find me out?"

"By elimination, deduction, radiation," Wickliff answered airily.

Winbush stared at him. Wickliff explained his hunt through directories, tranquilly taking the credit for the search to himself. Winbush eyed him admiringly.

"Capital, capital!" he said again. He was not so much at his ease as his visitor was. Nearly a quarter of a century lay between this greeting and their last, and the fact was upsetting. Winbush did not quite know what to say next.

"Are you stopping long on this side?" he asked tentatively.

"It all depends," Wickliff answered. "I've come over to have a bit of fun and to see life—other life. Come to think of it, it's a bit rum that I know no more of the world than London, and only a little of London at that, and a few South American cities. Well, well, I must make up for lost time."

"Capital, capital!" Winbush repeated again me-

chanically, "I hope you have prospered out there," he added awkwardly, almost timidly.

"Oh, yes, I have done fairly well," Wickliff answered bluffly.

The statement seemed to clear the air and thereafter the two old friends so newly reunited began to converse briskly.

Wickliff talked a great deal with his old friend in that interview and in many subsequent interviews, and seemed to be very frank, candid and self-revealing. As a matter of fact, he revealed very little. One reason was that there was much of his life which he had no wish, no intention, to reveal. Another reason was that he recognized in the first few minutes of the renewed intercourse, that Gregory Winbush was what he always was—only more so. Wickliff knew that Winbush was glad to see him again, but he also knew that Winbush cared very little—indeed, made no pretence of caring—as to what had happened to Wickliff in the long interval of sundering years.

Wickliff, therefore, with a great air of unbosoming himself, was in reality very dexterously reticent. Winbush was left to gather as much as he pleased from the few facts that Wickliff cast before him on an avalanche of words. In a word, Wickliff took for granted a knowledge of himself and his doings for the past twenty odd years as coolly as if he and Winbush had been regular weekly correspondents during the whole of that period. He allowed Winbush to appreciate that his old friend was well-to-do; that his old friend had lived a life that was not unadventurous and not over-respectable; he managed, craftily, to dazzle a little and to amuse a good deal, and yet at the end of all the seeming confession to leave Winbush about as wise as he was at the beginning.

It was not that Wickliff wasted any time in futile speculation as to whether Gregory Winbush would or would not approve of the *Palacio del Sud*, and its various annexes, appendages and allied enterprises. It had helped him to fortune and he was grateful to it, and he had no squeamishness as to the sources from which the money came that swelled his bank account so splendidly. Boys will be boys and men will be men all the world over, was his easy-going theory, and the pretty dancing-girl a perennial source of pleasure.

But Wickliff, remembering the England—and the Winbush—of his early youth, was aware that views of life were certain to be amazingly less torrid in a London suburb than they might be in the Argentine. The merits of the *Palacio del Sud* were considered many and varied in Buenos Ayres, but it might be difficult to bring those merits very clearly to the mind of a stay-at-home, stick-in-the-mud old fellow like Gregory, and Wickliff was never the man for negotiating unnecessary difficulties. So the *Palacio del Sud*, with all its amenities and suavities and facilities, was left unmentioned, and Wickliff ingeniously managed to convey to his friend the impression that he had done well by the discreet buying of land.

Winbush, on his side, was even more reticent as far as his immediate affairs were concerned. He admitted that he was very busy, immensely busy; he described himself vaguely as an inventor, of a scientific kind. But when Wickliff, who was always ready to take a lively interest in the affairs of anyone with whom he was brought in contact, tried to obtain preciser information as to his old friend's way of life, Winbush met his curiosity with blank denial. He never, he said, with a form of apology that was as firm as it was polite, permitted himself to talk about his work, as he found that to do

so interfered with the mental clearness which he found it essential to carry into the seclusion of the workshop.

Wickliff, who would have been perfectly willing to listen to his friend's confidences, was equally willing to be denied them, and he asked no more questions. Neither in that conversation nor in many subsequent conversations was Winbush's work alluded to, except in the most general way, by either of the two men. Neither in that nor in many subsequent conversations did Wickliff reveal any more of the incidents of his crowded foreign life than it exactly suited him to reveal. Winbush might, indeed, had he been at the pains to do so, have pieced together a general picture of an interesting, vividly-coloured life, but he summed the matter up with the comment that Wickliff had lived abroad, and was content to leave his knowledge at that figure.

There came, however, a stronger reason for the limitation of confidences just then between the two old friends, newly met, than caution or reserve. It came in the form of an interruption to their talk. A voice rose in song from the depths of the garden, a clear young voice, that seemed to be throbbing with instinctive physical joy. Wickliff smiled at the sound for the tune and the words were familiar to him. They made together the love-scene of Vienna's last masterpiece but one of musical comedy, the love-song of a Roumanian gipsy disguised as a Montenegrin prince, and of a Bulgarian princess disguised as a Servian dancing-girl. The song had run the range of the world, and in Buenos Ayres people sang it day and night as indefatigably as the Athenians of old are reported to have sung the "Eros, king of Gods and Men" of Euripides.

Mr. Winbush frowned a contradiction to the smile of his guest. He disliked music of any kind, and the

florid sensuousness of Thaler's melody stirred no pulse in him. Wickliff noted his host's lemonized countenance with amusement. Then, as the singer outside paused for a moment, letting the last notes of the princess's passionate frankness melt into silence, Wickliff, to Winbush's astonishment, raised his voice, and sang back the opening words of the gipsy-prince's answer, tunefully enough.

To the astonishment of the unseen singer as it seemed, for the voice that had been singing uttered a cheerful laugh, which again suggested, as the singing had suggested, the quality of physical joy. Wickliff looked at Gregory in unspoken interrogation, but before Winbush had time to say anything a figure flashed through the garden to the French windows, and a girl entered the room.

CHAPTER VIII

GONDOLINE

AS the girl came into the room, Wickliff rose from his chair with the emphasis—emphasis as of the theatre—which accompanied all his acts of courtesy. But instantly the natural man triumphed, and he sat down again, as absolutely as if someone had pushed him forcibly back into his chair, and he now kept his seat, staring and gaping. What he actually saw was a girl of about seventeen, radiantly handsome, graciously young, with the figure of a nymph deliciously accentuated by her slim clothing, and the face of a suburban angel framed in glorious hair.

Wickliff was accustomed, in the commercial manner which experience had made a second nature, to appraise the value of young women at a glance; to balance, with practical accuracy, the asset of flesh and the asset of adornment. Here was a girl in a white blouse and a blue skirt, a girl who wore pretty stockings and pretty shoes, a girl whose essential maidenhood was animated by the most delicate, subtlest hint of the spirit of provocation, a girl with a countenance of a kind of Saint and the tresses of a kind of Mænad. With the authority of knowledge, Wickliff appreciated the fineness of the lips, the brightness of the eyes. His approving glance seemed unconsciously to caress the suave outlines of the body: his approving mind unconsciously estimated the value of so much freshness in the hot places over there.

But it was not merely admiration, physical or financial, which made Wickliff surrender to his chair and gape and stare at the new-comer with so frank and unrestrained an amazement. For one swift bewildering instant time withered, years shrivelled; Buenos Ayres was as if it had never been. For that one swift instant Wickliff was young again, and hungry, full of desires and empty of money, mad with passion, but sane enough to take defeat with a smooth front.

It was the girl who had thus rejuvenated Wickliff. More than twenty years ago that very face had been his idol; twenty odd years ago that very form had been the bewildering allurement of all his pulses. The clock had wheeled back with dizzying rapidity; the steady heart of over five-and-forty was suddenly the fluttering heart of under twenty-five; the fulgency of Latin America had faded into the cloudy softness of a London sky. Nothing counted, nothing was, but the beautiful girl who whetted yearning and denied it and derided it, and made her lover ashamed of himself to be so slavish, and yet glory defiantly in his shame. There was little left for the world to teach Wickliff of the entertainments of the flesh; but in that one incredible instant he had sloughed all experience, renounced all knowledge. He sat there stockish, with a spirit suddenly new-youthed, while once again the world meant one woman and the loss of her meant the loss of all.

The voice of Winbush, a tired voice and slightly fractious, broke the spell. The clock wheeled giddily back; the Americas swam into existence and Tennis-Court House was itself again.

"This is my daughter," Gregory said. Then he addressed the girl: "Gondoline, this is my old friend, Wickliff Hersharn."

Wickliff rose to his feet immediately, steady now and self-possessed again. The girl made to hold out her hand for the conventional clasp. Wickliff, taking no notice of the offer, came close to Winbush's daughter, and laying his hands upon her shoulders, held her firmly, and looked steadily into her flushing face. It was second nature to him to handle women so, to scrutinize them, to appraise. The girl, surprised and embarrassed, tried unsuccessfully to wriggle free from his command. When she failed, the surprise on her face changed to annoyance; and there was familiarity again in its cloud of sullen mutiny. Wickliff, still holding the girl, turned to Winbush.

"She is very like her mother," he said, with the emphasis of one who realizes a miracle. Then he released the girl's shoulders, and shook hands with her formally and pleasantly, and the annoyance faded from her face as she re-appreciated the admiration in his eyes.

Winbush did not appreciate the earnestness in Wickliff's voice. He accepted the obvious statement that his daughter was like her mother for what it was worth. "Very like indeed," he agreed placidly. It was plain that the subject of the resemblance neither interested him nor displeased him. Clearly he had no hint of the tumult of emotions that Wickliff, to his astonishment, experienced.

"Am I very like my mother?" the girl asked, less perhaps from a desire for information than from a wish to appear at her ease with this nonplussing stranger, as, mentally, she labelled him. "I hardly remember her myself, of course, but we have a lot of photographs. The features are alike, I suppose, but I don't honestly see much likeness. People wore their hair in such a funny way in those days and wore such funny clothes.

And clothes and hair count for such a lot, don't they?"

Wickliff nodded an amused agreement with her dogma. Nobody understood better than he the values of adornment and disadornment. In reality, he had never seen that other habited as this one was habited; but his power to appreciate such differences had been destroyed by the overpowering impression of the physical identity.

While Gondoline was speaking, she observed with a certain perplexity this sturdy stranger, who certainly did not seem young, in her understanding of the word, but who certainly seemed ages younger than her father; who was certainly well dressed, which her father never was, and who looked at her with such daring advertisement of approval. In her short span she had basked in many admiring glances, but she never remembered to have enjoyed one so penetrating and comprehensive as Mr.—she had already forgotten his name—had bestowed upon her.

Also, while Gondoline was speaking, Wickliff heard a voice, now long silent, that had once been his music. But now, his first surprise over and done with, the seeming miracle an accepted fact, he was enjoying the curiosity of his experience very much as if it were a very subtly compounded and intriguing cocktail, which he was challenged as an authority to degust and to analyse. It is not often, he thought, that a man can shake off more than a score of years, and experiences enough to overcrowd a century, and find himself face to face with the love of his youth, as young, as beautiful, as arousing as of yore. And this marvel was vouchsafed in a house on the edge of a London common, in a house from whose windows you could see the golf-links peppered with scarlet spots. To the astonishment of Gondoline and

somewhat to the astonishment of her father, Wickliff began to laugh, quietly, heartily—as a man laughs who is having a good time and is set upon bettering it. By this time he had taken hold of the girl's hands, one in each of his, and was studying her face with a humorous care.

"Your clothes are different, my dear," he said, "and you wear your hair differently. I see that now, plainly enough. But I think your mother was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen—she was certainly the most attractive—and you have all her beauty and all her charm, and I couldn't give you greater praise if I talked for a fortnight."

Gondoline laughed, and Gondoline blushed, and Gondoline wriggled, for the man was holding her hands very tight, and she thought she ought at least to try to get free. But the attempt was a failure.

"There, father," she cried, "do you hear what the gentleman says? I never heard you tell me that I was the living image of my mother, or that she was the most beautiful woman in the world."

Winbush blinked dubiously at the pair—the strong, smiling man and the slim, smiling girl. His memories of the late Mrs. Winbush were not as Wickliff's memories. He found himself at a loss what to say, and so in his wisdom said nothing.

"Well, old Greg," Wickliff said, turning his head towards Winbush, while he still held Gondoline by the fingers, and the baffled girl assented feebly to their capture, "I suppose you have work to do and would like to be rid of me?"

Work to do! Very certainly Winbush had work to do; but also, very certainly, he was troubled by unfamiliar emotions, which assured him that he did not wish to be rid of a resurrected Wickliff Hersham. A

man may be dry, busy, self-absorbed, devoted body and soul to a Purpose; and yet if you suddenly bring him face to face with the days of his youth, if you rekindle for a moment some spark of the jovial glow of adolescence, he will, or may, recall the youthful days, not without pleasure, and welcome their memories, not without an exhilarating pang.

To Gregory Winbush this old-new Wickliff, with his queer exoticism, his jollity, his handful of sovereigns jingling in his pocket, his almost sinister self-content, was not in the least a traveller from an antique land, with some traveller's tale upon his lips. For him he was purely and simply a suburban youth, in cheap, reach-me-down clothes, with whom he used to go to cheap, reach-me-down lectures that professed to bring the best of Oxford and of Cambridge to the back doors of Kennington. For him he was, further, the youth to whom he found himself foolishly and fervidly a rival in love, over whom he found himself foolishly and fervidly triumphant. How long ago it all was, and yet for the moment it all seemed like yesterday, with the impoverished friend of his youth returned in opulence, and holding by the hands the girl that was the mould and pattern of the loved and lost. Gregory, troubled by unexpected recollections, had to stomach the irksome fact that he did not wish to be rid of Wickliff Hersham.

"I must be busy for a bit," Winbush admitted nervously. The announcement of the imminence of the Second Coming would not have induced him to sacrifice the whole of the morning's work with the Purpose. But he was loath to part with his glimpse of his long-vanished and long-forgotten youth, though he did not fully realize the reason of his reluctance. Felicitously,

he remembered the mid-day meal and the possibilities of hospitality.

"Stay to luncheon," he suggested, with an inviting smile that crumpled up his pink face into a network of wrinkles.

Wickliff nodded good-humouredly. "Righto!" he answered, "if I shan't be in the way."

Gondoline laughed. As she did so, she again tried to release her fingers from imprisonment; but Wickliff, as if he did not notice her effort, held good, and the girl surrendered. After all, the pressure was very friendly, and the familiar stranger her father's ancient pal.

"Why, daddy," she cried, "how you do go on! You have not long finished breakfast, and you talk as if luncheon was just coming in."

Gregory waved his hands in vague apology, those hands that were so nimble, direct and clever when they were doing the work that they had to do, in fulfilment of the Purpose—hands that seemed so limp and foolish and inept when the Man with the Purpose became the suburban householder.

"I am so sorry," he protested. His face was overcast. Then inspiration came. "Couldn't you find something to do for an hour or two," he suggested, "and come back for luncheon? We always lunch about one."

"We are always supposed to lunch about one," the girl corrected; "but it is rather a movable feast as far as daddy is concerned."

"I am a bit late sometimes," Winbush admitted, "but I promise to be punctual to-day, if you will join us."

Wickliff looked steadily into Gondoline's face, as if seeking to find invitation and welcome there.

"You are the mistress of the house," he said slowly. "Can you assure me that I shall not be in the way?"

"Not in the least," Gondoline answered. "As a matter of fact, we have rather a nice lunch to-day."

Wickliff domineered the situation cheerfully. He swung Gondoline's hands backwards and forwards while Gregory was making his suggestion, and then suddenly set them free, when the girl, who had become accustomed to captivity, made her announcement.

"That settles it," he declared cheerfully. "A nice luncheon at one is not to be resisted. You go to your work, Greg, and little Gondoline will look after me till then."

It was only later that Gondoline remembered, rueful and surprised, that she did not, at this instant of her history, resent being called Gondoline, plumb short, and little Gondoline into the bargain, though she was a tall maid of her hands; but rather took it for granted that with this genial personage formality halted and amiable assurance made itself at home.

"Perhaps," Wickliff continued cheerfully, "Gondoline will take me into the garden and show me her favourite flowers; and, perhaps after that, if I am very good, Gondoline will take me for a walk on the common, and introduce me to the beauties of the neighbourhood." He paused for a moment, and grinned before he added: "I don't mean the local young ladies. Where Gondoline is there's no room for another beauty."

Gondoline was neither timid nor shy, and she was secretly delighted with the stranger's somewhat heavy-handed compliment; but she pinked and simpered and pretended to look coy and dubious at Wickliff's proposal. Winbush, who did not notice his daughter's manifestations, and would not have understood them if

he had, gave a whole-hearted approval to the plan. It suited his book exactly. It would give him the desired opportunity of renewing his conversation with his friend without interfering with his immediate work. It would amuse the old friend, it would amuse Gondoline; it would relieve him of responsibility. Nothing could be better. It was just like old Wickliff, he reflected; always the one to suggest a way out of a difficulty. And so, with Mr. Winbush's pontifical benediction, a somewhat momentous matter was decided.

"The very thing!" he pronounced. "Gondoline, do the honours for my dear old friend till lunch-time. You say there is something nice for luncheon. So much the better; so much the better. And now good-bye, old man, for the present. Work, you know, work."

With these words Mr. Winbush disappeared into his workshop; the door closed behind him, and the deserted pair could hear the click of the key as it turned in the famous lock and secured Mr. Winbush from interruption.

CHAPTER IX

A WALK IN THE GARDEN

THERE was a moment's pause, a moment's silence, when the traveller from an antique land and the suburban damsel were left alone together. Then Wickliff stretched out his arms and caught hold of Gondoline again, this time by her elbows, and looked steadily into her face. Gondoline wanted to resent the familiarity, wanted to reprove the familiar man with the easy slang she commanded glibly. "Keep off the grass," floated pertly to her lips, only to perish there in pitiable silence. There was something in the expression on the stranger's face that made her feel, as she seldom felt, submissive. If Wickliff's manner was masterful, his gaze was all admiration—an admiration that might have been exasperating if it had not been so emphatic, even rapturous. He seemed to eat and drink of the girl's comeliness, and to grow younger and gayer as he fed. Gondoline's being twittered with a queer excitement.

"You are very like your mother," he said slowly. "She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw." He made a little pause, and then added with deeper intention—"until I saw you."

There was another little pause, in which he still scanned avidly her glowing face. Then he suddenly released her. "Well," he said pleasantly, "shall we go into the garden?"

Gondoline nodded, and the pair passed through the

French windows into the greenness and the colour beyond. It was quite a roomy, old-fashioned place, with a comfortable kitchen-garden and a small orchard at the end, and just now, in the clear noon light, it seemed very fragrant and attractive. In the early days of Wimbush's tenancy it had been somewhat neglected, for Gregory had not the least interest in flowers or trees or grass, or, indeed, in anything but the Purpose, and was never the man to find a salutary suburban relaxation from his labours by pottering about in his open-air dominion and doing a little desultory weeding and planting.

When, however, Gondoline became an inmate of Tennis-Court House, and her influence began to assert itself, matters mended for the neglected garden. Though her father resolutely declined to entertain the idea of a resident gardener, which was what the place wanted, he consented to the employment of a journeyman. This official came at first for a couple of days in the week, but as this limited service had little effect, it came about finally that he attended every day and practically all day; and as he happened, oddly enough, to have a real interest in his work, the garden thrived and flourished, and its changing hues and odours spread its pleasures equably over the shifting year.

Gondoline was fond of the garden, and it seemed as if the garden were fond of her and helped to feed her beauty with its tributary scents and pigments, enriching her young blood, and fortifying her young spirit with all the healthy essences of the earth. Her amazing parentage, her indigestible education, her narrow domesticity had not combined to make Gondoline either what people call a child of nature, or what people call poetical. If she had ever heard of Audrey of Arden, she would have agreed with her in thanking the gods that they had not

made her poetical. She was, indeed, aware that there existed a custom or practice of dealing with words which was called poetry, and that she owed to one of its practitioners the eccentricity of her Christian name. She had been teased a good deal about that name of hers at school, and had resented the teasing hotly. She had been little, if at all, consoled, when one of her teachers produced a volume from a series of British poets embellished with dreary little steel engravings that gave her the creeps, and read her the verses from which she derived her name.

—Gondoline roamed along the shore,
A maiden full fair to the sight;
But love had made bleak the rose on her cheek,
And turned it to deadly white.

Those were the lines the teacher read to her, and the teacher told her they were by Henry Kirke White, a poet who had died young in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and had been admired by Southey and Byron. Even, however, when she faced her scoffers with the volume, kindly loaned for the occasion, in her hand, its production had little effect upon the irreverence of her peers. One of them, who was supposed to be very well-read, quoted the famous sentence of Lord Beaconsfield's about the hansom cab being the gondola of the London streets, argued that Gondoline was only another form of gondola; and insisted maliciously that she might just as well be called "Hansom." In all probability the word "Hansom" would have stuck to her as a school nickname, if she had not promptly retorted that she knew very well that she was handsome. A laudable desire not to pander to her vanity caused the immediate abandonment of the proposed nomenclature, and a compromise

was effected by calling her "Bunny," because she disliked stewed rabbit, a frequent dish at the banquets of the seminary.

If she was neither simple nor poetical, she had a great, if unconscious sense of life and a great power of enjoyment. It was this power of enjoyment which established the intimate relationship between her and her garden. She did not know, and she had no wish to know, much about flowers, and she did not want to take much trouble about them; and would not have done so if there had been no gardener at command. But her eyes delighted in their vivid tints, and her nostrils revelled in their strong smell, heavily sweet or acridly pungent, it hardly mattered which, so long as it stimulated and piqued. She liked to lie and doze on warm grass in warm air; lulled in her semi-slumber by the soothing confusion of rustic noises all about her. She liked to prowl in the little orchard, and pluck the living fruit from the trees and bushes—apples, currants, pears, gooseberries, plums, each in their seasons—and savour their sap, their vitality, their freshness. She would kneel down on the edge of the strawberry-bed, and lower her cool, red lips to the cool, red fruits, and bite at them and rejoice in them, raw from the earth.

Once in the garden, Wickliff looked about him with a pleased smile. After the fervencies of the Transatlantic South, he found an ever-increasing relaxation in the coolness and greenness of an English country scene. In the simplicity, in the primitiveness, as it were, of the smooth lawn, the trim beds, the neat borders, the attentive, decorative trees, he found refreshment that helped him to forget the fierce luxuriance of the vegetation over yonder.

In something of the same way the girl that was now

walking beside him gave from her the same sense of cool, delicious contrast to the dancing women, the singing-women, of the *Palacio del Sud*. He had but to close his eyes to be again in that gaudy, tawdry temple of delights, to hear the strings rekindling Thaler's passionate numbers, to see the swarm of pretty compliant creatures humming and buzzing for the delectation of indigenous Rastas and cosmopolitan wanderers. And he had but to open his eyes again, to find himself amid the clear and comely ordering of an English garden, and in the company of an English girl in the pride of her pink and white arrival; an English girl who would have been adored and contested for at the *Palacio del Sud*; an English girl who was the living image of the idol of his own youth.

The girl looked at her companion with unveiled frankness of curiosity, wondering a little at his sudden silence. She was pleasantly conscious of the importance of her position as hostess, and its duties.

"Are you fond of gardens?" she asked, not because she wanted to know, but because she wished to make conversation and to seem at her ease.

Wickliff turned from his survey of lawn and parterres, and met the girl's gaze with one as scrutinizing and more bold.

"Very fond," he answered enthusiastically. It had not occurred to him up to that instant to consider whether he was or was not fond of gardens; but he was now ready to proclaim himself the passionate horticulturist. "I am fond of all beautiful things," he added slowly, with intention in his voice and in his eyes.

The intention was so obvious and so undisguised, that it disconcerted Gondoline, even while it flattered, and she looked away from the smiling, sunburnt face.

"Cheek" was the word that asserted itself in her mind; "cheek, cheek, cheek!" she thought, with much self-assurance of indignation. But she did not say what she thought. Wickliff smiled at her averted head and the deeper colour on her face. Embarrassed, and annoyed at being embarrassed, Gondoline moved a little way along the garden-walk. Wickliff followed her. Gondoline mentally resolved that she must not allow this self-assured visitor to have everything his own way, and to bully her—so she characterized his domineering manner—with impunity. She came to a halt and looked at him steadily.

"Did you know my mother well?" she asked.

Wickliff nodded. His face was grave again. "Very well," he answered, after a moment's pause.

Gondoline continued to question. She was quick enough to notice the slight change in Wickliff's expression.

"Did you know her before she married father?" she asked, and again Wickliff's face was cast in gravity.

"Yes," he said shortly.

Gondoline was silent for a few seconds, during which she moved forward again, and Wickliff went with her. His mind was alive with memories, like a growing fire. Again the girl halted and faced him.

"Were you in love with my mother?" she questioned bluntly.

Wickliff was for a moment embarrassed in his turn at the sudden directness of her words, and he sought to conceal his confusion by a forced laugh.

"Upon my word," he cried, "you are a very cheeky little girl!"

"Cheeky," the girl thought. "I like that from him."

"However," Wickliff went on, "if you have no right

to ask the question, there is no reason why I should not answer it. I was very much in love with your mother."

Gondoline still seemed to be curious. "Did she know it?" she asked.

Wickliff gave a little laugh. "Oh, yes, she knew it all right," he replied.

"Then why—" Gondoline began, and stopped. It was evident that she meant to ask: "Why did you not marry her?" and Wickliff answered, as if she had actually put the question:

"She preferred your father."

Gondoline's puzzled interest in her companion was increasing. Even now, she thought, he would make a serious rival to the best that her father could ever have seemed in the days of his youth, whereas Wickliff, with some twenty years less to carry, must have been very attractive indeed.

"Tell me all about it," she ordered, with the pretty imperiousness of one accustomed to dominion in a little sphere. She scented possibilities of romance, the real thing, of which, after all, her highly-charged novelettes were only laborious copies. But Wickliff only laughed again. He was not disposed to be over-communicative with this glorious reincarnation of his early love.

"My dear girl," he protested, "there is nothing to tell. Your father and I were great pals when we were boys together. We both happened to fall in love with the same girl, as pals very often do, and one pal won. It's a very old-fashioned story."

"I think—" Gondoline began, and again stopped without finishing her sentence. She had been on the point of saying that if she had been in her mother's place she would have chosen Wickliff. She stopped abruptly

for several reasons. In the first place, because she thought it would be encouraging too much this somewhat bumptious stranger, who evidently already had quite a good enough opinion of himself. In the second place, out of some sudden and unfamiliar sense of loyalty to her queer, querulous, fussy parent, whom she really liked in spite of his ways. In the third place, because she found her mind all mixed up with bewildering speculations as to what would have happened if Wickliff had been the pal to win the day. In that case, would she, Gondoline, have come into being at all? She tried to think of herself as the daughter of the alert, well-set-up man by her side, but she could not succeed in doing so with any convincing sense of reality.

Wickliff, who had waited a few seconds for her to continue her interrupted speech, now dissipated her swift meditations.

"What were you going to say?" he asked, scanning her faintly-troubled face with smiling eyes. "What do you think?"

Gondoline shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Oh, nothing," she answered. "I don't know. I forget what I was going to say."

Wickliff knew very well that the girl had not forgotten, and he formed a shrewd guess as to the meaning of the unspoken words. But he showed no further curiosity in the matter, and Gondoline glancing furtively at him, felt suddenly irritated at what she called his self-satisfied manner.

"He is a self-conceited beast," she thought. Her irritation was increased by Wickliff's next words.

"Won't you pick me a flower for my coat, Gondoline?" he asked.

The girl turned upon him snappishly.

"Do you think you know me well enough already to keep on calling me by my Christian name like that?"

Wickliff faced the ebullition with serene good-humour.

"Honestly," he said, "I should think that I did. I am an old friend of your father. I knew your mother well. It seems natural to me to call the daughter of two such friends by her name. I feel as if I were an elderly relation of yours with an elderly relation's privileges. But, of course, I know that I am nothing of the kind, and if it annoys you I won't do it."

The pleasantness of his voice, the amiability on his face, the quaintness of his suggested attitude, banished the girl's ill-humour. Certainly he did not look in the least like Gondoline's idea of an elderly relation, and though she did not choose to tell him this in so many words, she was prepared to show it by her action. She stooped as gracefully as a bending flower over the smiling flower-beds, which gave her so much of their gifts. She picked a blossom with decision, and, turning, placed it trimly in the button-hole of Wickliff's jacket. She had chosen, with that curious happiness of taste which it may be she gained from the flowers, just the right hue to harmonize with the colour of Wickliff's clothes. Wickliff did not know or care whether men of fashion were or were not accustomed to sport posies in their lapels. He was pleased with the tribute, pleased with his little victory.

"Thank you very much indeed, Miss Winbush," he said earnestly; but there was a slyness in his eyes for all his earnestness, and the girl saw it, and liked it, and laughed.

"Of course you may call me Gondoline," she said, giving the neatly-ordered button-hole an approving pat and then stepping back a pace to look at the effect. "I

haven't any friends, and nobody calls me by my name except father. But it is such a silly name, don't you think?"

"No," Wickliff answered; "it's an odd name, but it's not a silly one. You see, it is a very familiar name to me."

"Of course, it was mother's name," the girl admitted. "I wonder why her parents took a name for her like that—out of some old poem or other, when there are such lots of nice names to choose from, like Gladys and Muriel and Mabel. Of course, I can understand my being called after her, but why make a beginning with it?"

"I don't know," Wickliff said. "I suppose your grandmother took a fancy to it when she was young."

"I once asked father to let me call myself by some other name," Gondoline confessed. "I had found such a lovely name in a story—Ginevra. As it began with the same letter, it would have done for my handkerchiefs and things. But father wouldn't hear of it. Would you like to call me Ginevra? You can if you like."

"I would much rather call you Gondoline," Wickliff insisted. "It makes me feel like a boy to look at you, and to know that you are called Gondoline." Indeed, he looked very youthful as he spoke, with a youthful eagerness in his voice and in his eyes. "So let it be Gondoline, if you please."

"Oh, very well," the girl assented somewhat reluctantly. It had occurred to her that it would be rather romantic to be known to this attractive visitor as Ginevra; it would have its air of pleasing mystery; Ginevra to him alone, and Gondoline to all the world beside. Also, she felt a vague jealousy at his insistence upon the name because it had been her mother's name; at his repeated

insistence upon her resemblance to her mother. Gondoline basked in admiration, and she knew that the stranger admired her, but she wanted to be admired wholly for her own sake.

"But if I may call you Gondoline," Wickliff renewed, "there is something else that I want as well."

Gondoline was confident that he was going to ask if he might kiss her, and though the thought made the situation as real as any of the pictures in Pitlow's "Penny Novels for the People," she was resolved to be very firm, and, if need be, properly indignant.

"You want a great deal," she said, looking at him defiantly through narrowed lids.

"I want a great deal," Wickliff admitted cheerfully. "That is my way, and I find it pays in the long run. What I want now is that you should call me by my Christian name as well."

Gondoline was aware of a sudden sense of flatness. She would not admit that she was disappointed; but she was a little taken aback. Still she felt that as she had been prepared to deny, she must adhere to her intention, even though the request had not been the request that she had expected.

"Oh, that is very different," she pouted. "I really don't think I could do that."

"Why not?" Wickliff queried affably. "It would be awfully jolly if you did, for I hope that we are going to be such good friends, you and I. I feel already as if you were the dearest friend I had in the world."

Gondoline was flattered anew. It was pleasant to find that she was of so much importance in the mind of the most interesting human being she had ever encountered.

"What's the good!" she answered doubtfully. "How can we be such friends as all that? I suppose you

will be going back again directly to wherever you came from."

"I shall be doing nothing of the kind," Wickliff protested emphatically. "England's the place for me I can tell you, and I hope to see a great deal of my old friend and my old friend's daughter."

He thought as he spoke, with an amusement of which there was no sign in his voice, that a few hours ago he had no idea of making any such assertion. But he was already quite clearly aware that his plans had been miraculously altered, or rather that his planless purpose of enjoying himself had suddenly been resolved into a very definite plan.

Gondoline felt really pleased. If Wickliff was not exactly the Lord Jocelyn of her Pitlow hours and dreams, still he was a man, and a good-looking man, and a well-dressed man, and one that evidently had taken a fancy to her. The friendship of such a man would certainly make a stir in the stagnation of her existence.

"Oh, that's different," she murmured, somewhat at a loss what to say, for this chance visit was beginning to assume the importance of a momentous episode. "Are you really going to stop in England for some time?"

"I am going to stop in England as long as it pleases me," Wickliff replied buoyantly. "And I am quite sure that as long as you and I are friends, England will please me very much indeed, Gondoline."

His enthusiasm for the proposed friendship pleased the girl; the hint of tenderness in the way he named her name thrilled her a little.

"It sounds very nice," she murmured. "But I expect you've come to England to enjoy yourself, and you won't want to spend much of your time with us."

"Oh, yes I shall," Wickliff insisted heartily. "Don't

nake any mistake about that. And I shall enjoy f, too, top notch. We shall all enjoy ourselves to-r. Are you fond of theatres, Gondoline?"

Is she fond of theatres? The question seemed to t her very heartstrings, kindled delicious visions. hought of rare, furtive visits to the pit of the local ouse, for matinées of passing companies, visits e time was professedly employed in walking or shop--not that it ever occurred to Gregory Winbush to r himself as to how Gondoline employed her time its that were seasoned by many audacious glances, pursuits, many daring whispers of entreaty for her y. These proposed conversations she had the sense cline. The suburb was a small place, argus-eyed. ould not be safe for Miss Winbush to embark on iscuous flirtations, however sorely tempted by the of adventure. Then, too, there was the local Pic-Palace, cheap and thrilling, where you sat tight and i and alternately laughed at funniments, curdled at rs, and throbbed at melodrama. There was one of a cowboy film that she recalled even yet with tation. Was she fond of theatres?

"don't very often go to the theatres," she said, with gerated wistfulness. There seemed to be a chance easure coming her way which she was not going to f she could help it. "Of course, I love them dearly, ather is too busy to take me."

"We must stir him up," Wickliff asserted stoutly. body ought to be too busy to take a charming daugh-bout and give her a good time."

Gondoline mentally agreed with him, but she doubted much whether even this self-confident stranger ld be able to stir her parent up to the implied com-ance.

"I sometimes go to the picture palace," she announced with the air of one determined to be candid. She judiciously suppressed the matinée adventures with their embarrassing, exhilarating accompaniments. Wickliff thought of a breezy little picture palace that he ran at Buenos Ayres as a side show to the *Palacio del Sud*, and grinned.

"We must manage some pleasant little evenings," he said. "Dinner in town and a show afterwards, with supper to follow and motor you back afterwards. It would do old Gregory a world of good. Would you like it?"

Gondoline gasped at the bewildering proposition. To be asked such a question seemed as unnecessary as to be asked if one liked chocolate creams. But she knew her father, and it was very plain that this dazzling personage did not.

"You would never get father to do anything like that," she said decisively. She said it with a laugh, but in her heart she was much more inclined to cry at the thought of the glorious opportunities she must forego.

"Why not?" Wickliff demanded imperatively. He did not like any scheme of his to be interfered with.

"Because he is always so busy," Gondoline answered. "He never allows anything to interfere with his work."

Wickliff for the moment allowed his attention to be diverted from his proposed hospitalities.

"What the deuce is he so busy about?" he asked. "In the old days he never did anything. Had no need to, lucky devil."

"I don't know," the girl answered, and her declaration of ignorance was evidently sincere.

"You don't know," Wickliff cried.

Gondoline nodded.

"He never tells me anything about his work," she said. "Once I used sometimes to ask him what he was doing, but he always gave me to understand pretty plainly that I had better mind my own business, and I soon took the hint, I can tell you."

Wickliff wrinkled his forehead reflectively. Was it possible, he wondered, that Winbush was an anarchist, a false coiner, or a forger of bank-notes?

"How very odd," he commented. "What can the dear old boy be up to?" He promptly dismissed the problem as one of no immediate importance and returned to the matter that interested him more nearly. "I wonder," he continued, watching the girl's face closely as he spoke, "if Gregory would let me take you, sometimes, to a matinée, say, if he didn't care to come himself."

The swift illumination of joy on the girl's face assured Wickliff that his proposal would meet with no opposition from her. It ought not, he thought, to be difficult to persuade old Gregory, if he was so absorbed as the girl said. He remembered how readily Winbush had handed his guest over to his daughter's care. In this case Gregory's obsession was a thing to be devoutly thankful for.

"Oh," the girl said with an excited sigh, "I don't know about that. Perhaps he might. He never bothers much about what I am doing. We might try."

She was eager to seize this delirious chance, much too eager to conceal her eagerness.

"Would you like it?" Wickliff asked. He spoke as if his only interest in the matter was for the satisfaction of the girl.

"Of course I should like it," Gondoline cried, shrill with nervous anxiety. "There is nothing I should like better. Oh, I do hope he will consent."

"We can but try," Wickliff announced hopefully. "I am sure he is much too unselfish to wish to deprive you of any innocent enjoyment. You may be sure I will do my best to persuade him."

Gondoline looked at him gratefully. "Thank you," she said; and then suddenly added, half-timidly and half defiantly: "Thank you, Wickliff."

Wickliff smiled. "I am over-paid," he proclaimed, and held out his hand. "I hope we are going to be good friends, Gondoline. Let us shake hands on it."

Gondoline extended her hand, and he gave it just such a cordial pressure as he would have given to a man's hand, and then immediately released it.

They had been walking slowly while they talked, and by now they had reached the orchard and had come to the end of the garden. Wickliff looked at his watch and found that it still wanted an hour to the time for luncheon.

"Will you show me the common," he asked; "or are you too tired for that?"

Gondoline laughed gaily. "I am never tired," she cried. Indeed he could believe it as he surveyed her shapely form alert with health and youth.

She pointed to a little door in the garden wall.

"We can get to the common this way," she explained. "We have only to walk a little way along a lane."

She unlocked the door as she spoke, and the pair passed out into the narrow road that divided the domain of Tennis-Court House from its nearest neighbour among the villas. Gondoline locked the door and gave the key into Wickliff's charge. Side by side the pair walked in the direction of the common. Wickliff was thoroughly enjoying his morning.

CHAPTER X

OLD GROUND

WICKLIFF HERSHAM had a great deal to think of as he made his way back from the suburb to the big hotel in the Haymarket which he favoured with his patronage. Indeed, his thoughts were so busy and afforded him so much food for reflection that they kept him fairly well occupied for the rest of the day. They all centred upon the one astonishing theme of the reincarnation he had witnessed. Gondoline's voice was always in his ears, Gondoline's face was always before his eyes. She was the Gondoline of twenty years ago, the Gondoline of his youth, the Gondoline of the days of his full heart and his empty pockets, the Gondoline of memories that time had dimmed but that now were fresh as of yesterday. But the new Gondoline was even more wonderful than the old, lovelier to look upon, of a richer colouring, of a more potent vitality, of a more insistent charm. The past haunted him; the present enchanted him. All through the day he moved in a waking dream from which he was unwilling to be aroused. He had promised to dine with some friends at the Savoy, but he decided not to do so, and sent a message expressing regret for unavoidable absence.

When he had done this he went for a walk. He made for Bond Street first, and lounged slowly up and down it, looking at all the shops with the keen interest of one who desires to purchase pretty things and has the means

to do so. He lingered at the Aladdin windows of all the jewellers; he did not leave a dressmaker or a milliner unstudied. He knew all about women's clothes, and he gauged the latest creations with critical appreciation, thinking all the time how well this would suit Gondoline, how excellently that would become her. He wished he might send her a boxful of pretty jewelled toys, but he was too sensible and practical to do anything so outrageously foolish. Presently, however, he found himself in Regent Street, before the windows of a shop where the most exquisite sweets were made, and he went in and bought a box as big as a cart-wheel, packed to the brim with its precious cargo, and had it despatched at once by a special messenger in a taxi-cab to Miss Winbush, at Tennis-Court House, Brindling Common. If he had been more commonplace than he was he would have enclosed his card. If he had been less commonplace he would have accompanied the gift with a little bunch of violets. But the women that Wickliff knew best liked flowers in the mass, and Wickliff remembered that Gondoline had plenty of flowers in her garden.

He dined alone in the grill-room of his hotel, an unusual thing for him, for he was by no means cast in the mould of the contemplative philosopher. But he dined very well, which was usual with him, for nature had been kind to Wickliff as he would most have wished her to be kind, and had endowed him with the stomach of the traditional ostrich and an iron head for liquor. He never ate or drank to excess, but he could eat what he liked and drink what he liked, and in food and wine he liked the best that was to be had, and rejoiced in the fact that he could afford to gratify his appetites.

He toasted Gondoline's name in silence again and again during the course of his carefully-chosen repast,

and all the while the one wish of his heart was that he could have her seated opposite to him and sharing the feast. He felt sure that she was the girl to appreciate a pleasant meal in a pleasant place, that her healthy digestion would enjoy the savour of subtle dishes, that her fresh palate would delight in the golden bubbles of a vintage wine, such a wine as he was then drinking. What a companion she would be through that world of restaurants and playhouses; how delicious to witness and to satisfy her wide curiosity for the glittering game. He thought of her hair and of her eyes and of her mouth.

He enjoyed his deliberate dinner very much, and was pleased to express his approval of a certain very special cognac which the maître d'hôtel had been solicitous to bring to his notice. The high official had realized early that Wickliff was a guest to be recognized and reckoned with; a guest who had plenty of money to spend and plenty of intelligence to guide him in the spending of it. So Wickliff was always well served, and treasures from the cellar and cabinet were at his command which others less favoured knew not of. Wickliff was accustomed to such attentions over yonder, but here they pleased him hugely with the acrid piquancy of contrast.

Wickliff lit an Emperado and drank his coffee, and sipped the brandy of kings and mused agreeably. When he had finished his cigar he lit another, and then, with the spirit of association strong upon him, he resolved to take another stroll. But this time his steps were not bent towards any of the fashionable streets. He made his way to the Embankment and walked slowly by the river, from Charing Cross towards Blackfriars. The air was warm and mild, stirred by a small wind. Lights danced and leaped in the wrinkled waters. Wickliff assured himself that he felt good, but he also was aware

that he experienced something more than physical satisfaction, that an unwonted and bewildering exhilaration buoyed him up.

At Blackfriars Bridge he crossed the river and made his way along the Blackfriars Bridge Road to the Elephant and Castle. Here he turned to the right and presently turning again, this time to the left, proceeded to pick his way through a maze of dreary and dingy streets of dreary and dingy houses, broken at intervals by dreary and dingy squares and crescents.

In one of the streets he halted for a moment before a shabby house, indistinguishable, except to him, from any of its shabby neighbours. This was a house where he had lived so long in the days of his mean and meagre youth. He mounted the steps and, puffing at his cigar, gained glow enough to enable him to make out the number on the door. He descended the steps and continued his journey.

In one of the squares he again came to a halt. This time he was opposite an ugly, pretentious building, large and stuccoed, with urns upon its façade, and an image, a female figure, that, as he remembered well, was intended to represent Learning. A brass plate informed the world and reminded Wickliff that the place called itself an Academy for Young Gentlemen. Here—his parents having with difficulty scraped together the necessary sums—he had received his insufficient and injudicious schooling; here he had first met and made friends with Gregory Winbush.

He laughed a little to himself. How well he remembered it all, though it was more than a generation ago. He was very poor and very young. Winbush seemed to him to be enormously rich and to wear gorgeous clothes and to wallow in pocket-money. But the two lads had

taken to each other in the odd way that boys do, though their natures were as dissimilar as their circumstances, and poverty-stricken Wickliff had always been the idol of opulent Gregory. Wickliff had come to the end of his cigar by this time, and he dropped it on the ground and trod it out, as if in the pride of his new life he were treading out that old life, once and for all.

A little further wandering brought him within the area of a crescent which had been considered exceedingly genteel in the ancient eighties. Here was the house in which Gregory had lived with his parents, well-to-do tradespeople who had long abandoned the premises over their shops to the young ladies and young gentlemen who served there. Wickliff remembered, with a sudden anger and a sudden mirth, how impressed he used to be with the tawdry splendours of the Winbush home and with its liberal table, and how pleased he used to be when loyal Gregory obtained permission from his parents to bring his friend back to tea or dinner, and how the amiable parents patronized him.

Yet again he drifted, or rather steered his course, for the place had scarcely changed and he could have found his way about it blindfolded. This time his destination was a house in a queer little street that was called a Grove because it had a row of trees in front of each of the facing lines of houses. This was the house in which Gondoline had lived, the first Gondoline Simmonds. This was the house to which he and Winbush used to come in the days when they were both young men and both enamoured. By that time Winbush was nominally manager of his father's Emporium, and Wickliff, by some mysterious dispensation of Providence, clerk in a branch of a provincial bank in Newington Butts.

Twenty-odd years ago, but as living to him in that in-

stant as if it had all happened yesterday. Gondoline in all her beauty that even her slatternly finery could not conceal—he thought then that she looked like an empress, and he knew now that he was not far wrong—doing the honours of the somewhat squalid dwelling for her roguish old father. He called himself Captain Simmonds, although by some inconceivable blunder his name did not figure either in the Army List or the Navy List. He was given to drink and to suburban racecourses and to any kind of shady business that could be conveniently transacted across the bars of metropolitan public-houses and across the counters of local tobacconists. Winbush was believed to consider him rather dashing and was frequently willing to part with half-crowns that always were to be repaid and never were. Wickliff even then saw through the military hero, who despised him for his lack of cash, and Wickliff pitied the daughter, who was really very little to be pitied.

The Simmonds had a lodger, he remembered, a Scotch gentleman named MacAlpine, a taciturn person, reported to have some occupation in the City, which he sadly neglected. He cherished a hopeless passion for Gondoline, and passed most of his time in the back garden, deepening his habitual gloom with whisky. Wickliff had not thought of him once in all these years till that morning when he had recalled him to memory as the cause of Winbush's aversion to Scotchmen which he had mentioned to Farnell. Now he wasted a moment or two in wondering vaguely what had become of him.

Wickliff lingered awhile in the dreary Grove, recalling with ironical amusement the fiery passion that had made his youthful pulses glow. Those pulses were not so youthful now, but they were glowing again with a fervour that was different, indeed, but no less fierce. Pres-

ently he felt that he had had enough of retrospection and he left the Grove. Probably he would not have gone there at all or to any of the spots that he had just revisited, for he had no imaginative interest in melancholy associations, if it had not been for the morning's astonishing discovery. He made his way quickly to the Kennington Road, found a taxi-cab close to the Park, and was soon back in his big hotel. There he went leisurely to bed and to sleep, and dreamed, agreeable dreams.

CHAPTER XI

ON HAVING A GOOD TIME

WICKLIFF had landed in England with no livelier purpose kindled in his mind than the desire to have a good time. He had had a good time indeed, as men of his calibre estimate the thing, in his years of well-doing in Buenos Ayres, but the good time that he yearned for, the good time that he was resolved to command, had at least a decided geographical difference. What he yearned for was the good time that he would have liked to enjoy when he and the world as he knew it were twenty-odd years younger, the good time that he still felt perfectly ready to enjoy, although he and the world were by now twenty-odd years older.

He had every reason to assure himself that the desired good time was comfortably within his reach. He had made a tidy pile, and the bulk of its tidiness was invested solidly and stolidly, in gilt-edged securities, buttressed by England's greatness, which represented moderate reward untroubled by doubt. In spite of this, it was so extremely tidy that the dividends it yielded with quarterly punctuality would alone have allowed him to live very comfortably with no unpleasantly pricking sense of the shift from South American splendour. But Wickliff was never the man to limit himself to a hard-and-fast margin of safety. He had other sources of income. Many rivulets flowed towards him from that golden main stream which the ancients were pleased to name *Pactolus*.

These rivulets flowed, or sometimes trickled, through channels which were, it may be frankly conceded, less sure conduits than the regular and well-controlled canals of Government stock. But, each in its way, they helped to bear prosperity to Wickliff on their gilded waters. While it would never have occurred to him, or to any one else, however journalistic, to dream of inserting his name in the catalogue of the keepers of the world's wealth, he was undoubtedly a man of large means, who could afford to spend freely for the fulfilling of his heart's desire without ever needing to pause and, ignobly, to count the cost.

His knowledge of his delectable well-to-do-ness, so easily taken for granted over yonder, asserted itself very differently on Wickliff's arrival in his native land. In those first days of his return to England, for instance, it amused him to act like one that had newly and suddenly come into money. He found a whimsical satisfaction in carrying a handful of gold coins in one pocket of his breeches, a handful of silver in another, and a wad of five-pound notes in the breast of his coat. It gratified him to think that when he walked abroad he carried a hundred and fifty pounds or so in cash and paper about his person.

He was quite aware of the character of his conduct, quite conscious of whatever snobbishness and vulgarity inspired it, heartily amused at the consciousness. He was, in an ironical sense, very different from that implied in the fragrant saying of the German poet, reverencing in manhood the dreams of his youth. Here he was in England as he always had longed to be. He was accustomed to the liberal command of money, the liberal spending of money in Latin America, but the liberal command, the liberal spending of money in England

provided a new and delicious experience, and the zest of the thing thrilled him. So might a well-tipped schoolboy thrill at the touch of the bulging purse; so might Sinbad feel on disembarking at Bagdad on the return from his earliest voyage; so the intelligent swindler, watching Cape Colony drop behind the horizon and fumbling the illicit diamonds in his chamois-leather belt. Wickliff, jingling gold and silver between his fingers and proudly conscious that his bosom was padded with the paper of the Bank of England, found a strange entertainment in the remembrance of his needy youth. He grinned as he touched his bullion and chuckled as he flung his broad pieces here and there. He tasted a fierce, delirious delight in the buying of whatever he fancied, from the smiles on pretty faces to the bubbles of extravagant champagne.

A good time—that was what he was out for, just that and nothing more, but a good time unlike that which was familiar to him across the seas, that hot, exotic, tropical good time which was all enjoyed against a background of fierce sunlight and frightful colour, and the jars and hazards of a new world that was so old. What he wanted was a good time painted in vivid crimson upon the grey, cool canvas of the London of his youth; a good time that should be in oriental pomp of contrast with the leanness and the meanness of his youth; a good time that should enable him to recall with triumphant defiance the dreary hunger and the dismal thirst of those far-off, faded, immemorable years. Great heavens! how long ago they were, and how far off and yet how near they seemed now, and how insistent as he moved through the streets of this transmuted London. All was changed about him, even as he was changed; in a way the London of twenty-odd years earlier seemed as prehistoric as the cities he

used to be teased about at school, and yet it was London and so far the same, and he was in London and so far the same, and the reason why he had returned to London was to have a good time. To have a good time, to have a good time, to have a good time!

Yet now, as it were in an instant, in that indescribably minute portion of human experience which is popularly described as a "jiffy," this natural if somewhat commonplace ambition had been, if not entirely changed from its course, at least amazingly altered in its direction and amended as well as amplified in its scope.

Wickliff's honest, straightforward, genially sensual anticipation of a good time had been thus whimsically widened and tempered by an event which he did not expect to exert the smallest serious influence upon his visit to England. It had always been his resolve that whenever destiny accorded him the opportunity of returning to his own country, he would make it one of his earliest businesses to look up his old friend and rival and bridge as cheerfully as might be the gulf of years. He saw himself, in affable fancy, dining with good old Gregory at a smart restaurant or two, going with him thereafter to some place of popular entertainment, talking over old times in a fellowship mellowed by whisky and tobacco—and there an end! When he had succeeded, thanks to Farnell's aid, in finding out the whereabouts of Gregory Winbush, he had still in his mind on the morning when he made his journey to Brindling his plans for the fitful and brief renewal of the old amity.

All Wickliff's somewhat simple and even old-fashioned conception of a good time had been radically altered on the day when his destiny guided him to Brindling and brought him to a halt at the door of Tennis-Court House. He had entered that door as one man and had passed

out from it, in a sense, another man. In the old grotesque pictures of the Fountain of Youth you see elders and cripples staggering to the water at one side of the miraculous pool and emerging at the other limber, nimble, lusty and young. Such was allegorically the fortune of Wickliff Hersham. He alighted at Tennis-Court House with one purpose in life. He emerged from Tennis-Court House with quite another purpose in life. The self-satisfied, well-to-do, self-absorbed sensualist, suddenly found himself, if indeed still well-to-do and still self-absorbed, very unexpectedly a sentimentalist. He would have laughed that morning quite irreverently at the white beard of any prophet who had predicted such a change in his nature in the course of a few hours. But the change had taken place, and had left Wickliff staggered, bewildered, and at the back of it all, curiously delighted. All his lost youth seemed to come dancing back to him, insolent and delicious. All the desires and dreams of his budding manhood were suddenly and amazingly rekindled on the instant when he beheld the face of Gondoline and felt her fingers join with his.

There are persons in this world, and Wickliff was of their company, who attach what seems to the cooler-blooded an extravagant value to some event in early life, some attachment, some bereavement, some unexpected incident or change of fortune. As even to an undertaker some funeral is more fiercely pathetic than another, as even to your accomplished amorist one tear-stained handkerchief, crumpled glove or foolish page of script has a sudden arresting power of stabbing the heart, so to your ordinary, commonplace man, some one event in his ordinary, commonplace life will assume and assert a quite unreal importance. Like those phantasmal, gigantic figures which are supposed to haunt some German for-

ests, and are believed by the scientific to be no more than an eccentric enlargement of the shadows of the travellers that they terrify, so certain episodes in workaday lives bulk and dominate and direct. Thus Wickliff Hersham was whimsically the victim of his early love. Unconsciously through the intervening years of mere commerce, indecent adventure, unscrupulous speculation and ignoble profit, he had been carrying with him all along and unawares an ideal. As a pedlar in obscenities may unconsciously include in his pack the bravely painted image of a saint, and be amazed to behold it on turning over his reprehensible stock-in-trade, so Wickliff Hersham carried at all adventure, and all unwittingly, the icon to which he was now to pay homage.

On the day that he visited Tennis-Court House for the first time he had no idea that Winbush had a daughter. The friends had not corresponded after Gregory's marriage. Wickliff knew, indeed, that Winbush was a widower, for a mourning card had reached him belated years ago, addressed to that bank in Buenos Ayres which he had quitted long before. It was redirected readily enough, for Wickliff was a person of importance in the city; and Wickliff with a tributary and perfunctory sigh for his old romance, had sent a cable of sympathy to his old friend, and there, as he believed, the matter ended. At that time he had no thought of returning to England. The resolve to do so was not formed till many years later.

To find that Gregory Winbush, finally run to earth in his suburban seclusion, had a daughter was not in itself a fact either to surprise or to interest him. But to find that Winbush had a daughter who was the living image of her dead mother, and that she actually bore her mother's name, was staggeringly surprising and mag-

nificantly interesting. It was so unexpected, so unthinkable, that Wickliff in his coolest and most practical moments of reflection might very well be prepared to pardon himself for the transformation it effected in the plans he had laid down for himself.

CHAPTER XII

MIDDLE-AGED LOVE'S DREAM

THE Muse of History loves to be copious, but her vassal scribes are often compelled to be abbreviators. Let it be stated promptly that on the day which succeeded to the evening of Wickliff's somewhat dismal ramble in the southeast of London his car—hired for the occasion pending the purchase of a masterpiece—swam into port, as it were, at the door of Tennis-Court House. Let it be stated that the hour chosen for Wickliff's arrival was one during which he shrewdly and rightly surmised that Gregory Winbush would be swallowed up in his laboratory, or whatever he pleased to call his workshop. Let it be stated that Wickliff asked for Miss Winbush, and found that Miss Winbush was at home, and found that Miss Winbush was evidently expecting a visit from him, and was primed with expressions of gratitude for the cartwheel of sweets. Let it be stated that Wickliff stayed to luncheon. Let it be stated that Wickliff stayed to dinner. Let it be stated that Wickliff asked and obtained from Gregory, without the slightest difficulty being raised by Winbush, permission to take Gondoline to a luncheon in town, and a visit to a matinée on the following day. In this series of statements we are afforded the primary pattern of a long succession of days.

All this amicable progress of Wickliff's along the path of his desire, while it seemed rapid with the rapidity of

a Niagara to a girl whose life had been lived in the tranquillity of a pool, took, as a matter of fact, a very considerable amount of time and had to be reckoned, not in days or weeks, but even in months. Rapidity, like all other things, is a question of relation and degree, and what must seem swift to the maid of a suburb might very well have seemed slow to one that came from a land where life moved to a brisker music. Wickliff, however, had no fault to find with the pace. It was just as quick as he wished, and he had no wish for it to be any quicker.

For Wickliff's business, in those early days of his experiment in regeneration, as it may be described, was to make friends very closely with the girl of Winbush's, and that business followed the common lot of Wickliff's adventures and prospered exceedingly. Gondoline had been so lonely and so dull that she would have welcomed the visitation of any lack-lustre interloper. It did not take Gondoline very many minutes to discover that Wickliff was no such matter, but a stranger who shone with a very bright and decided light. It is true that when she first learned that Wickliff was a contemporary of her father's, and, therefore, patently an ancient of days, she was prepared to regard him as unnecessary and impossible.

But Gondoline was quick-sensed, if not vividly quick-witted, and she was soon able to realize the magnificence of her error. She had always accepted her father as an old man, fidgety, irritable, wholly uninteresting, and she had taken for granted, with the resolute philosophy of youth, that all men of her father's age were like him elderly, like him fidgety, like him irritable, and like him uninteresting. If it had been her good fortune to make the acquaintance of some of the brave bucks of the

Empire Club, she would have the sooner appreciated the ironic truth that she did not yet know the world to the core of its heart. But such experience had been denied her, and Wickliff was destined to be the unsealer of eyes.

Within twenty-four hours after her first encounter with him she found that she was face to face with something that seemed to her little less than a miracle. For she had to admit that she found Wickliff not merely opulent and affable, but also amazingly attractive, and —this was the pith of the miracle—astonishingly young. The whimsical mixture of suggested deference and undisguised insolence with which he, as it were, ranged himself by her side, and, so far metaphorically, put his arm round her waist, at once bewildered and titillated her. She had much to think about during the second day of her friendship with Wickliff Hersham.

She could have found plenty to think about during the many subsequent days, but she soon learned to abandon the foolishness of wasting her time in profitless speculation. The flagrant fact was that her life had undergone an extraordinary transformation. It was no longer drab and monotonous. It was shot with splendid colours; it pulsed with change. Gregory Winbush, far from expressing the faintest desire to limit in any way the growing friendship between the comrade of his youth and the daughter of his middle-age, welcomed cheerfully every proposal that Wickliff made—and in the beginning he made them incessantly—for Gondoline's entertainment, which also meant Wickliff's entertainment.

After a while Wickliff made no more proposals, because he found that there was no need to make them. Winbush was quite willing that Gondoline should spend

all her spare time in Wickliff's society, amusing herself as she pleased. He was glad to have the responsibility for her amusement off his shoulders—not that he had ever for a moment attempted to meet that responsibility—and so long as Wickliff was good enough to take Gondoline off his hands and leave him free to devote himself without disturbance to his work, why Gregory was willing, without doubt or question, to let him have his way.

Gondoline was naturally not inclined to quarrel with the amiability of her father's attitude. If at first she had been puzzled to form a clear, precise estimate of this assertive stranger, who was her father's contemporary and schoolmate, and, therefore, should have been considered as old and foolish as her father seemed—the thought was practical without being unfilial—she soon found herself taking Wickliff at Wickliff's own unspoken but plainly proclaimed estimate.

Of course, he was not young, in the sense that she was young, in the sense that the youths and maidens of the local lawn-tennis clubs—especially the youths—whom she wistfully regarded from afar, were young. But he talked, and bore himself, with a speech and a manner which blended the bluff heartiness of something like young manhood with a savoury spice of what seemed to her immeasurable experience and inexhaustible knowledge.

Also, he appeared to be amazingly wealthy, and he certainly was prodigiously generous. Already on one of Gondoline's slim fingers there sparkled a hoop of brilliants that Wickliff had insisted on giving her—insisting, indeed, in such a spirit of genial good-fellowship, and backing his insistence with such comfortable assurance of the authority of old friendship, that the girl could

not find the strength, as she had never cherished the least desire, to refuse.

After all, it was no part of her unconscious philosophy of life to refuse delightful things which were proffered in such profusion, and for which nothing, or almost nothing, was expected in return. If Gondoline's primitive instinct, fiercely illuminated by the conduct of wicked Russian princes and misguided millionaires in the pages of Pitlow, had inclined her at first to be a little suspicious of Wickliff's profusion, and to wonder, with a certain delicious excitement, what he was going to do next, she soon found that there was no need for her to excite herself, and she took Wickliff on his own terms because the terms were so amazingly easy. An occasional kiss or so was, after all, no very great concession to make for such a new world of wonderful pleasures and experiences. It is possible that Wickliff might have invited more compliance unchallenged, or at all events undenied; but for the moment he did not ask anything more. Naturally he occupied a great place in the girl's mind, if not in her heart. He had come to her, this unknown friend of her father's, out of a superplane of adventure, dimly adumbrated hitherto by the penny novelle, and with his coming the doleful loneliness of her life at Tennis-Court House had suddenly been glorified and made jovial.

That way was dazzlingly delightful to Gondoline. She seemed to float through life on powerful motor-cars, to feast in glittering banquet-rooms, to revel in theatres and music-halls. Rapturous musical comedies, which until now had been known to her only on the covers of vocal scores in the windows of the music-shop in the High Street, and through the bleatings of the itinerant hurdy-gurdy, were now familiar with the familiarity of

frequent visitation. Soon she knew every theatre and every restaurant in London by heart.

Also, she swam in the æther of this new existence exquisitely bedizened. When Wickliff had first proposed a night adventure, a dinner in town, and a theatre to follow, Gondoline's heart leaped and then quailed, for she knew that her poor little apology for an evening dress would never do for the halls of dazzling light. But Wickliff silenced her objections in the most satisfactory manner by driving her at once to a smart shop in a smart street, where in a few glorious minutes she was presented with an evening gown which seemed to her delighted sense the most beautiful confection that had ever been made. Thereafter, and quite as a matter of course, Wickliff took over the charge of Gondoline's wardrobe, and Gondoline was as glorious as a rose in June.

As for Wickliff, he was enormously pleased with himself and with this new life of his. It was so entirely unlike the life he had proposed to live that its novelty alone would have had a kind of fascination in it, even if it did not hold other reasons for fascinating him. A man that has long neglected his ancients may sometimes at haphazard pick a volume from his shelves—an Ovid, say, or a Horace—and glancing at pages once familiar, feel for a moment back in his school-days.

Here was an experience never to be known by Wickliff, but he was tasting a better. From its shelf he had taken down the best book in the world—the Book of Youth—and it lay open and lovely in his hand, and he was free for the sweet instant to read his fill of it. It had pleased Providence not merely to give him back the emotions of a quarter of a century earlier, but to give him also, as it were, the self-same object of those emo-

tions. It is true that in both emotions and object there was this difference—that while he experienced, or seemed to experience, the emotions with all the vitality of old, he was able at the same time critically to enjoy those emotions and to study himself with some amusement in their thrall. As regards the object, the difference mainly was that while Gondoline the first had no use for her penniless lover, Gondoline the second was very amiable indeed to her wealthy admirer.

There are many worldlings who would wonder at Wickliff's behaviour towards the girl, and at the small reward he seemed willing to reap for the advantages he gave her. But Wickliff was perfectly aware of what he was about. He knew his own business. He was one of those somewhat rare people who definitely know what they like in life, at a given point, and definitely set themselves to get it. He had known sentimentality in his youth, had drunk of its fountain from the same cup as his friend Winbush. He had found the draught unsatisfying, and drank thereof no more for many a long year. Thereafter his desire was to be independent, and he was resolute in his endeavour to compass that desire; resolute with a resolve that had no hesitation in being, if occasion seemed to need it, unscrupulous.

He was far from being the conventional strong man who takes the world by the throat and compels it to do his will. He knew well enough that he was no such man—he knew also that the world is at no time very largely populated with such men—and he was tranquilly aware that he was never likely to end his days as a multi-millionaire. But he also knew that he was strong enough and dogged enough to accomplish his own modest ambition, if the fates were at all complacent, and he

disappeared from England with a kind of Spartan resolution to return either with his shield or on it.

Plainly he returned with it. Plainly he was free to do as he pleased to a very considerable degree. Plainly it now pleased him to make himself the constant companion and munificent friend of Gondoline Winbush. Plainly, also, he was content for the time being to allow their steadily increasing intimacy to wear the air of a sort of harmless boy-and-girl flirtation. He had his reasons for his course of action, and they seemed to him sufficing.

It is not to be supposed that Wickliff denied himself, because of his companionship with Gondoline, any of those lively diversions which he had promised himself when he returned to his native land. But those same lively diversions had been for so long portion and parcel of Wickliff's daily life, had been not merely his own amusement but also his business and his stock-in-trade, that it was, after all, not very strange that he could appreciate a milder, or rather a finer, form of exhilaration. If for the time being he contented himself with taking occasional kisses from Gondoline's lips—kisses that were never disputed or denied—it was because he found, for the time being, sufficient satisfaction in such delicate salutations. They made him seem young again. They reminded him of the kisses he had been allowed to exchange with Gondoline the first behind the gooseberry-bushes of the house in that dreary Grove in the S.E. district.

CHAPTER XIII

HOUSE-HUNTING

THIS joyous way of life had lasted for some weeks, during which Wickliff's car made double journeys daily between London and the suburb. The world was growing warmer; the days were getting longer; the firstlings of summer were alert. Then it appeared that Wickliff had come to a momentous decision. He had, it seemed, discovered an intense affection for the neighbourhood where his old friend, and his old friend's daughter, resided, and had come to the conclusion that there was no place on the face of the habitable globe where he was so immediately desirous of pitching his tent. The three were sitting at luncheon one day in the dining-room at Tennis-Court—for even Wickliff and Gondoline realized that the girl must occasionally eat a family meal at home—when Wickliff sprang his surprise upon his allies. He assured Gregory that he was enchanted with the place, that the prospect of close companionship with his old friend fascinated him, and that, the world being all before him where to choose—though he did not quote the words, and, indeed, seldom quoted anything—he was ready and eager for the time being to take his share of the sun in the fascinating suburb of Brindling.

Gondoline was not surprised, though this was the first she had heard of the matter, for she had learned quickly not to be surprised by anything that Wickliff might do.

"That will be very jolly," she commented, and pledged him, as it were, in a lifted glass of water, her home drink still, though in Wickliff's company she had made acquaintanceship with fine wines and liked them.

Gregory was not surprised. He was pleased and flattered by Wickliff's assurances of regard; he liked, in a quiet way, to think that the old friendship had endured so well. He peered at Wickliff with a pleased smile.

"Bless my soul!" he said. "What a fellow you are! I should never have thought that you were the sort of chap to settle down in a quiet place like this."

After the first surprise of Wickliff's return had passed away Gregory had resumed his amiable relations with his old friend at the point where they had left off, and he talked to him when they met as if they were still a pair of youths together. Winbush had never seemed very young, and in his years of retired life and labour he had not grown consciously older. He still admired Wickliff as much as ever.

Wickliff had never truly told Winbush how he had made the money he could spend so lavishly, and Winbush, who was almost absolutely incurious as to other people's affairs, never thought of cross-examining him as to the sources of his wealth. He was conscious of a vague gladness that his old friend was well off. He would perhaps have been conscious, if he had reflected long enough, of a vague wish that his old friend had always been well off, as in that case certain things that did happen would not have happened. He was vaguely glad also that his old friend had returned to England.

He was very positively glad of two things. One, as has already been made plain, was that his old friend showed an interest in his daughter, and was willing to take her off his hands and amuse her a good deal, amuse-

ment being, no doubt, an essential medicament for youth, which he personally was powerless to administer. The other and the more important to Winbush was that his old friend showed no interest whatever in the Purpose, and never vexed him with importunate questions about his work. His delight in finding that Wickliff left him untroubled in this regard made him the more ready to acquiesce in the curious alliance that had been formed by Wickliff and Gondoline.

Wickliff smiled pleasantly at Winbush's air of surprise.

"You never know a man till you know him," he said, with the manner of one that utters a profound philosophic truth. "Because I have been a rolling stone for a time, do you think I have no desire left in me for gathering a little innocent moss? And where could I gather it better than here?"

Winbush blinked with an appearance of but fitful illumination as to Wickliff's meaning. Pleasantry of any kind, even pleasantry so obvious as Wickliff's, was entirely lost upon him. But he dimly felt himself called upon to voice some kind of opinion.

"Don't you think you may find it a little dull," he suggested, "after the first excitement of the thing has worn off?"

Wickliff had the grace to restrain a smile at the thought of the word "excitement" being coupled with the toast of Brindling. He glanced at Gondoline, and was pleased to see that the girl's colour came in answer.

"My dear old Greg," he said gaily, "it isn't excitement I want, it's companionship; and what better companionship in the world could I wish for than yours"—he paused an instant and turned towards Gondoline—"and, if I may be permitted to include Miss Winbush, hers?"

Gondoline pinked again. Gregory's face wrinkled with a smile of gratification. He was quite willing to believe that Wickliff found pleasure in his society, and he did not pause to reflect that, as a matter of fact, Wickliff got very little of it. It did not occur to him to reckon Gondoline as a serious element of attraction. To him Gondoline was still a little girl, old enough, indeed, to be able to manage after a fashion the affairs of Tennis-Court House, but not old enough to be regarded as an object of interest to an earnest man. And Mr. Winbush took Wickliff to be an earnest man, because he had succeeded in making a great deal of money. It did not enter his head that Wickliff could be paying any serious attentions to the girl, and the idea of attentions of any other kind did not come within his unsophisticated range.

"Of course," he declared, "it would be delightful for us to have you as a neighbour." He said "us," because Wickliff had included Gondoline in his speech, but "me" was the word which the simple little man had in his mind. Life had been easier for Winbush since Wickliff's arrival; he had more time than ever to give, unquestioned, to the Purpose, and he would have been exceedingly sorry if Wickliff had shown any intention of leaving England. "But are you quite sure you will like it?"

Wickliff reassured him.

"My dear Greg," he answered, "if I was not very sure that I should like it, I would not have said a word about it. I shall be glad of a change from cities; but I don't fancy living really in the country would altogether suit me. Brindling is the ideal compromise. I shall have clean air, green trees, tranquillity and the neighbourhood

old friend. What more could I want? And I
ways be in London, whenever I want to, within
1 hour."

last words were said with a smile in Gondoline's
on, as if to convince her that the little gaieties by
she had learned to set such store were not destined
se or to diminish because he was proposing to
; a citizen of Brindling. Wickliff's reason for
; the change was, indeed, in order that his com-
ship with Gondoline might be even more free and
red than it now was. The girl gave back a smile
erstanding.

"You are a one to make sudden resolves," she said.
; not so very sudden," Wickliff responded.

Mr. Winbush, feeling no further interest in the
, rose and quitted the company for the seclusion
workshop, and Wickliff and Gondoline went for
in the great car that he had bought in her com-
little time before.

as promptly made plain that with Wickliff Her-
decision as to any course was no other than the
other of action. The evening that followed the
station at Winbush's luncheon-table saw Wickliff
d—and very comfortably installed—in the building
asserted itself as an hotel, and was properly an
the noble old-fashioned sort, that had its being,
ere, on the heel of the common and the neck of
gh Street that straggled up to the common from
ition. It had been an inn of repute in the old
ig days. Great noblemen had slept beneath its
and great highwaymen had baited their nags in
bles. It had carried the name of a saint for a
when it declared itself for no more than an inn,

and it carried the saint's name still, although the inn of yesterday was the hotel of to-day, and the stables a garage.

There was no particular reason why Wickliff should take up his residence at the suburban inn, except that Wickliff in the lightness of his heart chose to do so. Gregory had offered him, somewhat perfunctorily, the hospitality of Tennis-Court House; but Wickliff had been tactful enough to decline the proposition. He might very well have remained in his town quarters, but he wanted to taste rusticity, and so he became a guest at the local hotel.

Though the hotel had once been an inn, its powers of accommodation, if conformable in a great degree to the customs and ways of an elder world that was ignorant of a speed limit, was gustable enough to an easy-goer. Wherefore Wickliff's basis of operations for his whimsical siege of the suburb was the old-fashioned inn with the name of the patron saint, the high, white-faced building that had waited for the stage-coach, and that, now, eagerly welcomed the motor-car.

From this cover, as it seemed, he was to issue daily, fringing the populous skirts of the common, until he found the particular kind of nest that would exactly serve the turn of a bird of passage suddenly inclined to call a halt in its flight.

Neither Gregory nor Gondoline quite realized how it came to be understood that the girl was to be the man's persistent companion in his search for a habitation. But Wickliff made it plain that it was so understood, and neither man nor maid had any objection to offer. All Gregory asked was to be left alone with the Purpose. All Gondoline asked was to be amused, and the prospect of acting the part of a kind of lady patroness to the

suburb seemed to her to contain a very distinct element of amusement.

Together the pair perambulated the common. There were always houses to be let in that suburb for those that possessed the means to pay their highly dignified rentals, and new houses in various astonishing manifestations of architectural ingenuity were coming into being in all directions. Thus there were plenty of houses to choose from, but Wickliff proved to be very difficult to please. He was determined to have a house right on the common, and there were several such houses available. He considered that all the older houses wanted a great deal doing to them, in order to render them what he considered habitable. The new houses in the newly-opened regions seemed for the most part delightful to Gondoline, but to Wickliff's practical nature they appeared to be more showy than sensible. He did not, of course, immediately need a very large house, being a single man, but on the other hand, for reasons of his own, he was resolved not to accept a small house. In the end, however, he pitched upon a residence which promised more or less to content him.

CHAPTER XIV

DRIFTING

BEHOLD, then, our adventurer settling down for the time as a denizen of Brindling. As a natural consequence the eyes of Brindling were upon him, and the minds of Brindling deliberated upon him. The people who lived in Brindling lived for the most part orderly and methodical lives. Some of them were wealthy and had nothing to do, and did that nothing with a daily monotony of magnificence. Others, that were wealthy too, had work to do and did it doggedly. These went regularly to the City every morning and made more money with pleasing persistence, and came back regularly to their stately villas and their inevitable games of lawn-tennis or golf. Such a man as Wickliff was an astonishing contrast to the habits and customs of the suburb. He evidently had nothing to do, and never went into the City, but he did not in the least resemble those other inhabitants who had nothing to do, and did not go into the City. It may be said of them in a phrase that at first they did not know what to make of their new acquisition. Were they going to approve of him; were they going to like him? Wickliff had his reasons for choosing that they should approve of him and like him, and he set to work to carry his point.

Genial, cheerful, self-possessed, he had all the ingredients for the qualification of good fellowship which a knowledge of his ample means speedily confirmed. In

a very little while after he had become, unostentatiously, a citizen of the suburb he had been visited by the Vicar, who found that in a well-spent portion of a pleasant afternoon's conversation the residuum was felicitous.

The new-comer was, apparently, sufficiently orthodox to pass muster as a commendable parishioner, if apparently a little inclined to laxity in his interpretation and expression of his duties towards the church. But to counterbalance these slight signs of backsliding which the Vicar hoped in time to overcome by the application of his favourite blend of Father of the Church and Man of the World, there were evident testimonies to the stranger's worth. His views as to subscriptions to local charities and to local entertainments were conceived on a scale of generosity unusual, if not altogether unfamiliar, in the suburb.

For a long time past indeed the local Member of Parliament, Mr. Saul Aaron, had dazzled a little the vision of the inhabitants by the riches of the figures which emblazoned the munificence of his contributions to the exchequer of the district. But the good Vicar was distinctly staggered when Wickliff, after having cast a glance over the printed list of local benefactions which the Vicar dangled temptingly before him, responded to the lure in a manner that was as satisfactory as it was diplomatic. To have overpassed the Aaronic contributions would have been a challenge; to have equalled them a defiance.

Wickliff, the wise, the sly, did neither. He expressed very straightforwardly his regret that he could not hope to compete with such great political and financial magnates as Mr. Aaron—"magnates" was the word he used, and the Vicar liked him all the better for it—and then, when the excellent ecclesiastic was wondering how small

an amount he could reasonably be expected to greet with gratitude, Wickliff quietly put his name down for a series of sums that only fell short by a margin that saved Mr. Aaron's face from the ostentatious bounties of the sitting member. The Vicar left Wickliff that day with a light heart and a metaphorically heavy pocket. He had no fear that the promises were of the nature of pie-crust. No man, he argued shrewdly as he walked—indeed, in a sense, he leaped, he floated, he flew—no man would take a long lease of a house like The Minarets, and furnish it with so evident an appreciation of the solid comforts of a miserable world, who was not certain to meet any promises he might make for the welfare of the parish.

The conquest of the Vicar was naturally the prelude to further conquests. Wickliff, a Fabian in the warfare he was waging with a suspicious society, took no overt steps whatever to secure attention and esteem. He waited for the suburb to come to him, and the suburb, urged by the well-nigh sibylline exhilaration of the Vicar, came in all its forms and orders, and according to all its decorums and observances. And from each and all of his visitors Wickliff, without seeming to ask for anything, obtained exactly what he wanted.

When Major-General Poffin, advancing in good order, took The Minarets by storm—the gallant general never attended a tea-party without the air of heading a forlorn hope—he fell a victim in a twinkling to the easy amiability of the man he had come to patronize. Wickliff listened to the Poffin volubility with an air of appreciation that was, by virtue of its self-restraint, more flattering to the warrior than the subservience to which his bullying manner had made him accustomed for so long.

One result of the general's visit was a score for Wickliff's tranquil strategy. With an air of admirable detachment Wickliff, after listening with outward discretion and inward hilarity to the Poffin view of life, let fall a casual intimation that he hoped in time to become a member of the Brindling Club. Now the Brindling Club, albeit the earliest centre of fellowship that Brindling had known in the days of its unimportance, was, as its members frankly admitted, very small potatoes in comparison with the Empire Club of which Major-General Poffin was the thundering Jove.

The Empire Club had come into existence in those ruddy effulgent days when the seclusion of the common had been annihilated by the march of the magnates. When Brindling became, not so much a suburb of London as a suburb of Lombard Street, such an institution as the Empire Club became no less than an essential necessity for the invaders. And as for those luxurious invaders to wish was to have, the Empire Club came into being, if not, like Aladdin's palace in the compass of a single night, at least like Aladdin's palace, in its pomp and pride and glory of clubbishness, though, superior in this to Aladdin's palace, it need not stoop to the confession of an unfinished window. Never since the dawn of time was there a suburban club so splendid, so expensive as the Empire Club.

It was of the Temple of Pleasure that General Poffin, of his own motion, not so much invited as commanded Wickliff to become an inmate.

"The Brindling Club, my dear sir," he shouted, in that voice which he would have used, had he ever been privileged so to employ it, upon some stricken field, "my dear sir, not the Brindling Club for a chap like you. Allow me to be your sponsor for the Empire."

The inner Wickliff was jigging and whistling with hilarity. The outer Wickliff was modestly astonished.

"My dear General," he protested, urging his obscurity, his unimportance, his modesty, his diffidence to such purpose that before he knew where he was, as the saying is, he found himself a generously elected member of the Empire, proposed by Major-General Poffin, seconded by Vice-Admiral Lammens, and rapturously under-written by an Elective Committee, whose collective names read like a chapter from the Book of Kings.

Wickliff paid his fifty guineas entrance fee and his first subscription of ten guineas, and winked as he signed the cheques. But Wickliff was a tactician who missed no chances, and on the same day that he was accredited a member of the Empire he was also duly and formally elected a member of the Brindling Club.

The suburb's general acceptance of Wickliff as an asset of its well-being and respectability may have been in some degree gratifying to his personal vanity. It certainly was gratifying to Gondoline, who astutely perceived that she was likely to gain by it something at least of all that she hitherto lost through her parent's surly isolation. She began to find friends in the neighbourhood. The Vicar's wife enlisted her services for a local bazaar of which Wickliff Hersham was one of the principal patrons, and her services proved very effective. Her beauty made her stall a centre of admiring youth, eager to buy things it didn't want in exchange for what it wanted very much indeed—the privilege of exchanging a few words with the lovely Miss Winbush.

Soon after she became a member of one of the local lawn-tennis clubs. She knew little of the game when she first joined, but Wickliff was a pretty good player, and a very good teacher, and Gondoline was a quick and

capable pupil. Alert and adaptable, she soon escaped from the need of tuition and in a little while proved herself to be quite an expert.

Wickliff's residence in Brindling had, after a time, a considerable effect in softening and mellowing the aridity of Mr. Winbush's existence. He seldom retired to his workshop after dinner, as had been his custom, but preferred to remain in the hall and to listen to his daughter at the piano, assailing the latest importation from Vienna, while he and Wickliff played a game of chess, at which Mr. Winbush was very good, or a game of piquet, at which Mr. Winbush was very bad. He took more of a fancy for his garden, too, and would occasionally stroll up and down there with his old friend in the long, clear summer evening, talking over old times, while Gondoline busied herself with the flower-beds.

Such placid evenings were not, indeed, the rule, for there were often pleasure trips to London, made for the amusement of Gondoline and of Gondoline's companion. But as Mr. Winbush was never to be tempted from his privacy, Wickliff saw to it that he was not left too much alone or allowed to feel neglected. What Wickliff wished had still a very potent influence upon Gondoline. Still, Mr. Winbush was not exacting, and when the girl wanted to go out in the evening with Wickliff he never raised any objection. Had he not always the Purpose!

Slowly the summer flowed along. The term "flowed" is fitting, for it was a wet summer, but Wickliff did not mind that, nor did Gondoline. For if the weather was for the most part unfavourable to out-of-doors adventure, it was highly adapted to cosy expeditions to London in the great car, to cheery feasts at restaurants, and visits to theatres and all manner of blithe little Bohemian jollifications.

Then summer waned, or waded, into autumn, and still found Wickliff very content with his new existence, and quite unwearied of his close and curious companionship with a beautiful and vivacious girl. Brindling might have disapproved of the friendship if it had known much about it. Long weeks of unseasonable wetness made lawn-tennis an infrequent pastime, and it was only at the lawn-tennis club that Brindling saw anything of Gondoline. For Gregory Winbush, though more amiable in his domestic life since the coming of Wickliff, was as persistent as ever in his seclusion, and as sturdy in his refusal to welcome his neighbours underneath his roof. Those that cannot or will not entertain must not expect entertainment is a stern social law that was much in force at Brindling, so the social world was almost as alien to Gondoline as ever. But she did not mind, and she did not miss it so long as Wickliff was there—a delightful, free-handed comrade.

As a bachelor, Wickliff was not expected to entertain much, but he did what was expected of him well and discreetly, and he was as popular as he desired to be in Brindling. He was generally understood to be a near relative of Winbush, and in consequence of Winbush's daughter and the frequency of his visits to Tennis-Court House, created less comment than might perhaps have been expected. The movements of people who live largely in motor-cars are not so easily followed as they were in the days when suburban folk, desirous of visiting town, were largely dependent upon the local train service. So the intimacy of the life which Wickliff and Gondoline lived was unnoticed by Brindling, unnoticed and unknown.

Autumn having done its best to redeem the failure of the summer, yielded in its due season to a winter that

recalled the wet summer rather than the traditional time of snow and ice and holly and ivy. And this open winter found Wickliff still in Brindling and still assiduous in his attentions to Gondoline, and still questioning himself and getting no decisive answer to his question. And so the open winter drifted mildly and leisurely into spring.

With the dawning spring Wickliff made an unexpected move. He announced, quite untruthfully, that it was necessary for him, for business purposes, to pay a short visit to Paris. His real reason was a wish to get away from Brindling and from the direct influence of Gondoline for a short period of untroubled consideration of his position.

The announcement annoyed Gondoline, and she said so. She liked Wickliff's society; she had come to depend upon him for frequent amusement; and she resented the idea that he could be willing to leave her side.

But Wickliff persisted in his design. He went to Paris, and stayed there for a month, deliberately enjoying himself. He was experimenting to ascertain if Gondoline's companionship was essential to his well-being. Before the end of the month he came to the conclusion that it was essential, and the end of the month saw him back in Brindling again.

CHAPTER XV

AN INTRUDER

ON a certain spring morning Wickliff was strolling in the Winbush garden smoking a meditative pipe. It was the anniversary of the day he had walked there for the first time with Gondoline. He had just lounged across from his own abode, and on learning that Gondoline had not yet made her appearance, he carried his thoughts into the open air and revolved them in the society of the flowers. They were not apparently altogether of a satisfactory nature, for he seemed graver than he generally allowed himself to show, or than he would certainly have allowed himself to show if there had been any one in the garden to watch him.

After he had paced a few turns up and down he returned to the house and stood by the open French windows waiting for Gondoline to appear. If he was impatient, he did not show it; if he was impatient, his patience was not sorely tried. In a few minutes Gondoline was standing at the head of the stairs, smiling down upon him. The smile seemed to Wickliff more constrained than of old.

Gondoline always looked pretty, but Gondoline thus, fresh from her restful bed and her healthful bath, looked exquisitely cool and dainty and alluring. She was very pleasantly and aptly dressed, for she had proved that she possessed a happy instinct for clothes when opportunity was afforded her for gratifying it.

Wickliff stared at Gondoline with the frank admiration which he always offered to her. Whatever mistakes he might have made he had made no mistake in his estimate of her beauty. She, on her part, from her elevation, looked down upon Wickliff with a faintly strained smile. The man looked well enough in his neat blue serge suit. His sunburnt face carried its habitual look of genial good-humour. His sturdy figure would have been the better for an inch or so more, but, of course, he looked shorter than he really was, seen thus from above. Undoubtedly she was feeling critical.

Silence reigned over the pair for a few seconds. Then Wickliff broke it, taking the pipe from his mouth.

"Good morning, prettykin," he said cheerfully. "Why haven't you come into the garden all this time?"

Gondoline made a face at him, and rubbed her eyes.

"Because I have only just got up," she said truthfully; and then added, quite untruthfully: "And I am still sleepy."

As she spoke she ran briskly down the stairs and came to a halt in front of him. Wickliff laughed at her assertion.

"Lazybones," he protested. "Come for a walk? We haven't had a walk together for a long time."

"Whose fault is that?" Gondoline retorted. "If people will go rushing away to foreign parts they can't be taking walks here at the same time."

"Very true," Wickliff agreed. "But now I am here, and in excellent walking humour. Where shall we go to?" He seemed to take it for granted that Gondoline would agree to his proposition. "Shall we go to our hollow in the common. We haven't been there for an age."

Gondoline interrupted him with a little frown, as if the suggestion did not appeal to her.

"I am tired of that old hollow," she declared fretfully.

Wickliff looked at her with good-humoured reproach.

"Oh, why?" he asked. "We used to be so cosy there, hidden away and sheltered from the wind, while you munched chocolates, and I told you stories."

Gondoline looked at him with a sudden mischievousness on her face.

"You were not telling me stories all the time," she said demurely, with the air of one that had memories.

Wickliff nodded in sign that he, too, remembered what the girl was thinking of.

"No," he admitted cheerfully; "part of the time I was kissing you. Could I be better employed?"

As he spoke he moved a little nearer to the girl with the evident intention of kissing her anew. But Gondoline drew back, patently divining, patently avoiding his purpose. Wickliff smiled.

"You did not mind it then," he said quietly. "What has made you so austere?" Then, as the girl did not answer, he went on: "Well, will you come for a walk?"

Gondoline shook her head emphatically.

"I am afraid I can't this morning," she said, but she said it with no note of sincere regretfulness in her voice, and Wickliff was quick to note her intonation. But he showed no sign of piercing through her purpose. All he did was to drop into the nearest chair and assume an appearance of profound gloom.

"Alas, why not?" he asked, in an elaborately hollow voice that simulated the deepest dejection.

The assumption seemed to annoy Gondoline, for she looked cross—it was astonishing how cross she could

look when a certain mulish mood was upon her—and the tone of her voice was very cross as she pronounced sharply the one word "Tennis."

Wickliff seemed only to be amused by the girl's manifest irritation, and his manner was calculated to increase it, for he looked at Gondoline with a mocking smile. "Tennis," he murmured; "omnipotent tennis." He paused for a minute after making this comment, and then punctured the silence with a question: "With Charlie?" he asked, with an air of extreme urbanity.

His suavity seemed to intensify the girl's annoyance. "With Mr. Trevor," she answered shortly, at once correcting and confirming Wickliff's interrogation.

For some minutes there was silence between the pair, a silence that Gondoline employed by flitting about the room and rearranging the flowers in the vases and jars about her. Wickliff employed the silence in smoking slowly, in watching Gondoline steadily, and in meditating upon all that her brief answer meant, and might mean, to him and to her. Had he, after all, been unwise to go away, to leave Gondoline to herself, liberated from the dominance of his presence?

Wickliff had come back from that experimental holiday in Paris with the firm resolution to bring Gondoline definitely into his life. He had made up his mind that he would ask her to marry him, and he did not entertain the slightest doubt that she would accept his proposal.

But it is one thing to resolve, and another thing to execute, where a woman is concerned. When Wickliff returned to England he speedily realized that Brindling was not the same that it had been when he quitted it a month before, or, rather, to put the matter more precisely, that Gondoline was not the same as she had been

before his departure. In the first moment of greeting her he realized that there was a change in her—vague, indefinable and distinctly disquieting to a would-be wooer. It did not take Wickliff long to learn what had caused the change. The cause was the young gentleman whose name he had just mentioned, Mr. Charles Trevor.

Mr. Charles Trevor had made his appearance in Brindling before Wickliff had started on his voyage of discovery to Paris, but Wickliff had not been made aware of his existence. Gondoline met him at the lawn-tennis club on the day after Wickliff's departure, and as she admitted to herself very candidly, she took a fancy to him from the first. She was feeling a little lonely on account of Wickliff's departure; she was feeling a little vexed with Wickliff for going; in brief, she was just in the mood to be receptive to new impressions. Had Wickliff been upon the spot he would have promptly recognized the danger and been quick to counter it. But he was kicking his heels in Paris like a colt in a meadow, and Gondoline's inclinations were unchallenged and unchecked.

She had grown so used to Wickliff's companionship, in the course of their warm, vivid friendship, that she accepted it and the domination it implied without question and without regret. But she had taken it for granted that her companionship was as essential to him as his was to her, and it surprised and irritated her to learn that he could take his leave of her so casually and with such apparent unconcern. Her surprise and her irritation were still fresh upon her when she made Charles Trevor's acquaintance.

The moment that Wickliff got back he knew that something was up. He was too well-read in women's moods and humours not to notice at once a change in

Gondoline's attitude towards him, difficult to define, but impossible for experience to deny. He felt, with an anger which he was careful to keep clamped down, that he was no longer the important person in Gondoline's life than he had been before he set off on that trip to Paris and its pleasures, which had seemed to him to be so sensible a move, and which he was now inclined to regard as supremely foolish.

The recognition of a change in Gondoline was soon followed by the discovery of its cause. Gondoline was not exactly artful in concealing her emotions, and Wickliff noted the frequency with which a certain masculine name began to assert itself in her conversation. Dexterously, with apparent innocence, Wickliff drew Gondoline out on the subject and learned much. Then, very soon, he made the acquaintance of Mr. Charles Trevor, who seemed to pass most of his spare time in Gondoline's society, and learned more. He learned that he was face to face with a very dangerous rivalry. All this he was considering now as he smoked his pipe and watched Gondoline, who fidgeted uneasily, conscious of being watched.

Wickliff blew a great grey cloud into the air and spoke again, this time with a mock earnestness that irritated the girl quite as much as his mock tragedy had done.

"Gondoline," he asserted, "you are not the same little Gondoline that you were before I went away."

Gondoline denied him at once.

"I am just the same," she protested. "A girl cannot change in a month."

Wickliff sighed ostentatiously.

"A girl can and a girl does," he insisted. "Before I went to Paris you were all over me, if I may say so."

Gondoline interrupted him indignantly.

"But you mayn't say so," she protested, and her forehead was puckered with a frown.

Wickliff went on, unheeding her interruption.

"But when I come back," he said deliberately, "I find you all over this new-comer, whom you call Charlie, and whom I call Mr. Trevor."

Gondoline turned on him hotly, with flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes.

"You find nothing of the kind," she cried, "and you've no right to talk like that."

Wickliff refused to be impressed by Gondoline's show of indignation. He went on as slowly and judicially as before, as one who weighs his words.

"Mr. Trevor is, I am sure, a most excellent young City gentleman, but he is very like a great many other young City gentlemen, and I do not think that he is a very special addition to the rustic delights of our suburb."

Gondoline had by this time got over her first feelings of annoyance at Wickliff's arraignment, and had decided to treat it with irreverence and not with seriousness.

"Oh, you don't, don't you?" she said pertly, and made a mocking face at him. "It is just possible that other people do."

He grinned good-humouredly at her impudence.

"Gondoline," he said, with increased solemnity, "it would be idle to deny that I have noticed since my return that your habitual interest in the game of tennis is greatly increased when the game is coupled with the name of Charlie Trevor."

He paused for a moment and then corrected himself gravely. "Of Mr. Trevor, I should say. But why should not tennis attract you when coupled with the name of your humble servant?"

Gondoline reddened a little and surveyed the toes of her neat shoes in evident embarrassment.

"Oh, well——" she began, and then hesitated and said more, but persevered in the scrutiny of her shoes.

Wickliff encouraged her to go on. "Be frank, candid indeed," he urged. "Does Mr. Trevor play better than I?"

Gondoline lifted her eyes, looked at him and made a brief protesting grimace.

"I would not say that," she answered briskly, and then led with an air of careful consideration; "but, of course, he is a bit more springy, you know."

If Wickliff felt the knock shrewdly, he took it in good part. "A bit more springy," he echoed, lifting his hands towards the ceiling with an assumption of despair. "Goodness! maturity, how you are mocked in that comment. A bit more springy!"

He shook his head gloomily at the girl, who immediately became remorseful and apologetic.

"Wicky," she said, and the use of the pet name belied the amiability of her intention, "I really did not mean to be rude, but——"

She paused again, and Wickliff completed her sentence. "I asked you a civil question and you gave me an impudent answer. Well, I have another civil question to ask you."

Gondoline's face darkened a little, and she eyed Wickliff mistrustfully.

"Nothing more concerning Mr. Trevor, I hope?" she asked sharply.

Wickliff answered her with her own words:

"Nothing more concerning Mr. Trevor, I hope."

There was a slight pause, and then he went on again.

"We have been very good friends," he said thoughtfully, "ever since the day when you and I walked for the first time in the garden yonder."

Gondoline nodded agreement, and clapped her hands in approval of the friendship.

"I should think we were," she cried. "Why, you have been quite the fairy godmother to me."

Wickliff laughed a little dryly at this peculiar form of commendation.

"Not quite that," he protested. "I decline to think of myself as an old lady in a flowered gown and a conical hat. But we promised to be good pals in the beginning and good pals we have been. We have had great games together. What plays we have seen and what jolly little meals we have eaten!"

His words recalled to Gondoline many pleasures once so unfamiliar, now so delightfully familiar, and she looked and felt grateful. What a world of enjoyment she had owed to him in the year of their strange friendship.

"You have been awfully kind to me," she admitted, and she made the admission with a smile.

"Well," Wickliff went on, "now I want you to be awfully kind to me in your turn. We have been such good friends, that I want us to be better friends—so much better friends, that we shall change friendship into something else."

Gondoline looked at him suspiciously, and again the shadow of a frown darkened her forehead. "What are you driving at?" she asked sharply.

Wickliff was ready to explain.

"When I came here a year ago, I came, as it were, from the ends of the earth, from the waste places, from the wild places. I won't say that I had kept very good

company over yonder, for I hadn't. I had lived with wasters and wildlings, I had lived on wasters and wildlings; I had made my pile and got tired of it all and came back to see if I could stand old England again after the noise and racket and jollity of way beyond, and I came here to see my old friend and found you in his house."

Gondoline burst into a fit of laughter, which banished the frown from her countenance.

"I remember," she said, "when I came into the room how awfully surprised I was to find a stranger there. Father isn't fond of strangers, you know. And how you stared at me, as if you had seen a ghost!"

"So I had," Wickliff commented in a low voice, "the ghost of the girl of my youth."

"And then," Gondoline went on, ignoring the interruption, "father said: 'Gondoline, this is my dearest friend. Do the honours,' or words to that effect, and ran off to his workshop and forgot all about us for hours."

Wickliff nodded endorsement of the recollection. "And you entertained me," he said, "and took me for a walk in the garden, and we soon were great pals, weren't we?"

His insistence on their speedy intimacy seemed to annoy Gondoline.

"Yes," she said shortly.

Again there was a pause, and then Wickliff spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice.

"Gondoline, I want you to marry me. Gondoline, will you be my wife?"

Gondoline looked and was astonished. Whatever she may have expected him to say apparently she had not expected him to say this.

"Marry you," she repeated mechanically.

"Marry me," Wickliff affirmed. "I hope you do not find the suggestion unpleasant?"

Gondoline shook her head.

"Of course not," she answered, "if you are only joking." There was an element of resentment in her tone, all the same. The worst of this queer friend of hers was that she never felt quite sure whether he was jesting or serious in the things he said, in the views of life he sometimes professed to hold.

"I am very earnestly in earnest, I assure you," Wickliff replied, and the sound of his voice convinced the girl that he spoke truly. "I went away to Paris to make up my mind, to be quite sure. I have made up my mind. I am quite sure. Will you be my wife?"

In his mind Wickliff was cursing himself for having left the suburb. If he had made his offer a month ago, he was confident that though it might have surprised the girl, it would certainly have been accepted. Now he knew that the smooth face of a youth came between him and his heart's desire.

Gondoline looked at her wooer resentfully.

"But, Wicky," she complained, "I never thought of you in that way?"

"In what way did you think of me?" Wickliff asked calmly. "Be honest. We are quite alone."

Gondoline seemed to find a difficulty in replying. She hesitated, collecting her thoughts, trying to order her confused notions of the Wickliff of the past months and the Wickliff of to-day.

"Oh, of course," she said at last. "I like you very much, and I knew that you were fetched by me in a way, and it was fun when you pretended to teach me flirting and all that, and you gave me a good time and

jolly presents and pocket-money, but I thought it was only play."

Wickliff looked steadily at her, wondering what the girl was really thinking behind the seeming simplicity of her speech. She seemed to him more attractive than ever now that she was so suddenly withdrawn from him, so aloof and strangely distant who had been so near and familiar.

Gondoline met his gaze with an expression of engaging candour. In her heart she was conscious of a sense of satisfaction that he had not spoken before. The range of her mind was too limited to make room for more than one object of interest at a time, and the new interest had eclipsed the old.

"I was only playing with you at first," Wickliff agreed; "amusing myself with a child who was very ready to amuse and to be amused. But the game had to end some way or other, and now I want it to end this way. Have you never thought of getting married?"

Gondoline looked at him maliciously, and then swiftly glanced away. "Often," she said in a low voice.

"And when you do," Wickliff suggested composedly, as if he were putting a quite indifferent question, "is it with a younger man?"

Gondoline nodded, saying nothing, and Wickliff went on:

"I suppose, my dear Gondoline, it would hardly be a convincing argument in my favour for me to assure you that I am very well preserved? If I've had a bit of a racket in my time, I've stood the racket very well."

Indeed, Gondoline, even with the obsession of that youthful figure in her mind, had to recognize that Wickliff carried himself well; had to remember that she had found him very attractive only a few short weeks

earlier. But she said nothing, and only shook her head in reply to the question.

Wickliff smiled.

"Would Mr. Trevor seem more alluring to you?" he asked quietly.

The frown returned to Gondoline's puzzled face. "I don't know why you talk of him all the time," she said angrily, "but he is more of my age, isn't he?"

Wickliff answered her with playful reproach:

"You don't know why I talk of Mr. Trevor all the time, disingenuous maiden. Why, ever since I returned to find that he had honoured our neighbourhood with his presence I have taken a back seat. No more rambles, no more matinées, no more philandering. Gondoline, we have become almost strangers, we who were, with all respect for the decorums, but seldom separated."

Gondoline's frown deepened a little.

"Do not be too sarcastic," she suggested, "or you may hurt yourself. You know very well that I always took you for a kind of uncle."

Wickliff grinned cheerfully.

"First I was a fairy godmother; now I am a kind of uncle. You know very well in your heart, little Gondoline, that you are telling a fib, and a foolish fib at that. But even if you had looked upon me as Uncle Wicky—and you never did, you know, as I could remind you if I were inclined to reminiscence"—he paused for a moment to watch with amusement the pinkness spread and deepen on Gondoline's pretty cheeks—"in many foreign countries a marriage of an uncle with a niece is quite a commonplace every-day affair. But I am not your uncle and do not want to be. Uncle be damned! I want to be your husband."

Gondoline looked at him sulkily from under lowered lids, and the mulish expression that he knew so well was on her face.

"You only want to because you say I'm like my mother," she said, with a bitterness that was half reality and half sham. "You are not in love with me; you are in love with a silly sentimental memory."

In very fact Gondoline had been from the beginning jealous of that likeness of herself to her mother so extolled and admired by Wickliff. Her narrow, selfish, and straightforward animal nature resented hotly that any admiration paid to her should be paid for any other reason than the fact that she was a physically attractive girl. She had not allowed this jealousy to interfere with her intimacy with Wickliff and her acceptance of all the gifts that he could give. Now, however, it made a convenient weapon, and she used it with effect. There was truth in her statement and Wickliff knew it, and Wickliff nodded as she spoke.

If she had not been so like her mother, if she had not rekindled the spark of exquisite memory long smothered and encrusted by the ashes of his sensuality, if she had not made him remember with so passionate a vividness the desires and dreams of his youth, if she had been as pretty as she was now, but pretty in a different way, it would never have occurred to him to want to marry Gondoline. He had, indeed, so much friendly respect for funny old Greg as would prevent him from doing the girl any grave wrong. But he would have kissed as long as he listed and gone away without a sigh. It was the terrible, the exquisite resemblance which shackled him and made him eager to do things which under other conditions he would have regarded with derision.

If Gondoline's words stabbed him, Wickliff's smiling countenance betrayed no sign of hurt.

"Will you marry me, Gondoline?" he said again, doggedly insistent.

Gondoline shook her head emphatically.

"I am very sorry," she began, but Wickliff quickly interrupted her. He guessed from the expression of her face what she intended to say, and he wished to avoid the formulation of a definite refusal.

"Do not say any more for the moment, please," he ordered cheerfully. "I suppose you think you have given your heart to young Goldilocks; but hearts so given come back sometimes. I can sit on a fence and wait for the homing bird."

"I am afraid you will have to wait a jolly long time," Gondoline said decidedly. "I don't want to hurt your feelings in any way, but I tell you straight that I don't want you to talk nonsense any more, for if you do we shall quarrel."

Wickliff shrugged his shoulders. His equanimity was apparently entirely unruffled by the conversation that had just taken place.

"The incident is closed for the moment," he declared. He glanced into the garden as he spoke and saw something which made his smile widen. "You cannot imagine how I envy Mr. Trevor his good fortune; and see, here he comes through the garden, quite unconscious—shall we say quite unconscious?—of the honour you do him."

Gondoline gave a little startled cry, as of one taken suddenly unawares. "I did not dream it was so late," she cried. "I must get my tennis shoes and racquet."

Wickliff laughed. "And put on your prettiest stockings," he suggested.

Gondoline made a mocking face at him. "Are not these pretty enough?" she asked, and as she spoke, she picked up her white skirts high enough to afford a liberal display of the fine white thread stockings she was wearing.

Wickliff shook his head judiciously.

"Not nearly," he pronounced with decision. "Go and put on those white silk ones I gave you with the tiny silver clocks. You have no idea of the effect on adoring youth of a pair of pretty stockings on a pair of perfect legs, floating from the flying skirts of tennis."

Gondoline laughed as merrily as Wickliff. There was something in her nature that had always been tickled by the freedom of his speech.

"Don't be naughty, Wicky," she said gaily, and then, swinging on her heels, she ran briskly up the staircase to take his advice and disappeared.

Wickliff examined his pipe, shook out the ashes, and slowly proceeded to fill it again, whistling thoughtfully the while. His occupation was interrupted by the entry of the young man whom Gondoline and he had just been discussing.

CHAPTER XVI

CHARLES TREVOR

YOUNG Mr. Trevor strolled in from the garden with an air of deliberate ease and familiar at-homeness which was very exasperating to Wickliff. As his lodgings were in the more modest part of the suburb that lay some distance away from the central glory of the common, they were situated well to the rear of Tennis-Court House. It was, therefore, a much longer way for him to make his entry at the Winbush mansion by the front door than to come up through the garden and enter by the French windows in the rear. When the young gentleman showed persistent signs of becoming a frequent visitor, it occurred to Gondoline that it would be more convenient for him to come in by the garden. To speak with stricter historical accuracy, the convenience of the plan had first occurred to the ingenious mind of Mr. Trevor, and his ingenuity managed to transfer the idea to Gondoline's mind and make her think of it as her own. It resulted in the cunning young gentleman being entrusted with a duplicate key of the door at the end of the garden. Now he had come in by that door, had lounged along the garden, and pausing on the threshold of the French windows had looked curiously into the room.

Charles Trevor was certainly, at first sight, a very pleasing figure, and the pleasant impression persisted long after the first sight. For this very reason it was

easy to understand that he might seem more attractive to Winbush's daughter than to Wickliff Hersharn. Trevor was very tall, only short of six feet by some fraction of an inch, with fair curly hair of the kind to be seen on the heads of some Greek statues. His features were regular and well modelled, and save for the nose, which suggested his Saxon blood, there was something Hellenic in their fine firmness. His eyes were rather small, and a little too close together, but they were brightly blue and alert, and seemed always to shine with the spirit of health and manliness and good-humour. He was broad-chested and muscular, and his clean, athletic figure moved limberly in its trim suit of white flannels. Perhaps the tie was a little fierce in colour. Perhaps the fierceness of tint was a trifle accentuated by its repetition in the hue of the cummerbund around the young gentleman's middle.

But taking Charles Trevor as he stood, you would pronounce him a fine specimen of a sturdy, well-set-up, healthy, vigorous young Englishman, moulded on the pattern that has helped to make our island what it is, and helped us to that dominion over which the sun never sets. Wickliff invariably found himself involuntarily humming the tune of Fragson's "Billy Brown" whenever he looked at Trevor, and he had looked at him a good deal during the few days that had passed since his return from Paris. Wickliff knew that you would not need as much as five minutes' talk with him to learn all his views about every human topic. You would feel instinctively that this jolly young fellow was straightforward, simple and direct; also that there was no damned nonsense about him; also that he had a very pronounced dislike to foreigners in general, and to one race of foreigners in particular. It was further fla-

grantly patent that his imperial hero was a statesman intimately associated with Birmingham; that poetry meant for him the political Muse of Mr. Kipling, and that he was uncompromisingly sure that Mr. Bonar Law's latest speech should be, to use his own felicitous and pithy words, nailed to the mast.

All this you would perceive, as Wickliff did, and in all this you would be right, whether you agreed with him or disagreed with him; and as most of those that knew him agreed with him very heartily, you would, if you were honest, be compelled to admit that he was very pleasing, very cheery, very taking.

Wickliff admitted the merits of the lad readily enough and frankly enough to himself, and being a sensible and wary person, admitted them readily enough and frankly enough to Gondoline. It would not do, he knew, for five-and-forty to be too sourly critical of five-and-twenty. Such mischief as had been done would not be bettered by crabbing this unexpected rival to the girl who so obviously admired him. But the acceptance of Mr. Trevor's merits and the recognition of Gondoline's admiration for Mr. Trevor did not tend to foster any profoundly friendly feeling in his bosom for an active young gentleman who played lawn-tennis so well and who was said to dance the Turkey trot to perfection.

It was, therefore, with a very pronounced sense of dislike, very effectively concealed under a demeanour of blank indifference, that he eyed the fascinating apparition in blameless flannels and ferocious neck-wear. The dislike was not diminished by the insistent consciousness which assured Wickliff, who understood comely human animals, that here was a very comely human animal indeed, and one that would be as popular in Buenos

Ayres as in Brindling. But in Buenos Ayres he would not have interfered with Wickliff.

As soon as Trevor saw who was in the room he entered and greeted Wickliff with his usual air of frank geniality. To Wickliff his manner seemed to say: "Here I am, a true Briton, every inch of me, ready to be on the best of terms with any man so long as he behaves himself in accordance with the British Constitution and with the political opinions that appeal to me." What he actually did say was a more commonplace "Good morning, Mr. Hersham," which was uttered with a fine show of affability. Trevor had not seen much of Wickliff in the few days that had elapsed since Wickliff's return from Paris. But he knew that he was reputed to be rich, which was so far in his favour, and he guessed that he took an interest in Gondoline, which made a score against him. But as it did not occur to him to regard Wickliff as a possible rival he could afford to be amiable.

Wickliff, on his side, was resolved to be distinctly unamiable. He did not like young Goldilocks, as he had nicknamed him to Gondoline, and he saw no reason for hiding his dislike too carefully. So he struck a match deliberately before responding to Trevor's greeting with a cool and curt "Good morning." Then there came a slight pause, during which Wickliff lit his pipe and cast about him for means to irritate the visitor.

The young man looked about him rather impatiently.

"Ripping weather," he asserted. Wickliff nodded agreement with the assertion. Trevor swung his racket carelessly. "Is Miss Winbush about?" he asked in a consequential manner that galled Wickliff, who thought he saw an opportunity of being annoyed and took it.

"She has just gone upstairs to put on her prettiest stockings," he answered.

Trevor stared at him in surprise. "Did she tell you so?" he asked.

Wickliff shook his head. "Oh, no," he replied teasingly, "I told her to do so."

The young man's blond face reddened with anger. "That was very good of you," he snapped, and his voice belied, as it was meant to belie, the words it spoke.

Wickliff smiled blandly at his show of anger.

"I am an altruist, my dear sir," he said. "When Gondoline is skipping about with twisting skirts, I wish her stockings to be worthy of her delicious slimness. Even if I do not see them, others will, so I advised her to put on a particularly pleasing pair—fine white silk with a tiny silver clock."

Trevor moved towards Wickliff with a sudden fierceness of manner which did not at all disturb his antagonist.

"What the devil," he questioned, "have you got to do with Miss Winbush's stockings?"

Wickliff was as composed as his questioner was irritated. "Oh, nothing," he answered calmly; "except that I give them to her."

The young man's colour deepened and his manner grew more blustering.

"Look here," he shouted, "I don't understand all this."

Wickliff, enjoyably puffing his pipe, observed him with tranquil insolence.

"Is there any reason," he queried, leisurely drawling, "why you should understand?"

Trevor's demeanour grew more truculent, and his speech noisier and angrier.

"Will you be so good as to inform me if you are any relation of Miss Winbush?" he asked.

Wickliff remained imperturbably indifferent to his opponent's show of rage. He was meaning to be offensive, and if his manner of offence was as he freely admitted to himself, crude, it was serving its purpose as well as if it had been of subtler quality.

"I am no relation of Gondoline," he said, with a marked insistence upon the Christian name; "but since I have always been her father's friend——"

Trevor interrupted him rudely.

"Since the year one," he sneered.

He was plainly ready to meet offence with offence, which made the little conversation more interesting to Wickliff, quite unannoyed by Trevor's interruption.

"Not quite so long as that," he said pleasantly; "long enough, shall we say, to feel the responsibility of a kind of guardianship for Gregory's daughter."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," Trevor grunted again. He was very surly and very sulky, but this was just what Wickliff wanted. He was only amused by the surliness and sulkiness.

"That is as it may be," he answered tranquilly. "At least I have the approval of Gondoline's father, and as Gondoline's father doesn't seem to have much money to spare for Gondoline, and as Gondoline happens to be fond of finery, why, it comes about that I happen to be useful to Gondoline. You wouldn't like Gondoline not to wear stockings, would you?"

The incessant repetition of the girl's name and the impudence of Wickliff's manner prodded Trevor into a red-hot rage and he let himself go headlong. He swung himself a little nearer to Wickliff and towered over him menacingly.

"Look here," he roared, "you are an older man than I, but if you give me any more beastly cheek I shall jolly well give you a thick ear."

Wickliff, somewhat to the young man's surprise, did not seem at all alarmed by the threat whose intention, if not its terms, carried him back along the lapse of years to a dingy school on the south side and its belligerencies of the playground.

"I think not," he said placidly.

His air of confidence only served to make the other more furious. "You can think what you damn well please," he raged, "but I shall do it all the same if you talk any more about Miss Winbush."

Wickliff only smiled exasperatingly. All he wanted was to annoy his adversary, and the fact that Trevor's conduct in the squabble was more commendable than his own did not trouble him in the least.

"What right have you to make yourself Gondoline's champion?" he asked. "What right have you to threaten to thicken my ear because I am privileged to give Gondoline her stockings? No right whatever, impetuous youth!"

Trevor clenched a large right hand ominously.

"Right or no right," he growled, "I will chance it all the same, if you don't hold your jaw. I tell you I'll smash you, if you give me any more of your lip."

Wickliff studied the clenched fist without apprehension, as if it were some natural curiosity, and shook his head thoughtfully. "I think not," he hazarded; "really, I think not."

Trevor snorted derisively, but Wickliff ignored the ebullition and continued:

"For two reasons. First, because though you are, as you truly remarked, younger than I am, I doubt if

you would manage to carry out your thickening purpose as easily as you suppose."

Trevor's face puckered with amusement, and laughter gurgled from him.

"Do you!" he bellowed. "Good Lord! feel my biceps." As he spoke he bent his arm, and the sturdy muscles asserted themselves under the soft flannel.

Wickliff declined the offer politely.

"May I deny myself that delight?" he begged. He really was as confident as his words implied. He remembered the Japanese jugglers at the *Palacio* over yonder, who had taught him many kinds of jiu-jitsu, and many other tricks, and he knew that he was capable of disabling a man much younger and much stronger than himself who was not equally learned. But he did not propose to end the argument with a rough-and-tumble scuffle in the Winbush drawing-room. He continued his speech where he had left it off:

"I have lived long enough in the wild places to acquire some wild ways." He took a couple of steps away from Trevor. "One of these wild ways is to carry a gun." On the word he slipped his hand to his hip pocket and produced a magazine-pistol, small and sinister-looking, which he handled with the manner of an expert. "I am quite a good shot, I assure you," he added.

Trevor was undoubtedly somewhat taken aback by the turn of affairs. The introduction of a deadly weapon into a conversation between a youth in white flannels and an elder in blue serge in the drawing-room of a respectable suburb seemed curiously incongruous. But he tried to retain his supremacy.

"Don't talk nonsense," he ordered. "Put that thing

away. England is not a wild country, and murderers are hanged here, I can tell you."

Wickliff looked amiably compassionate.

"My dear chap," he protested, "I should not murder you. It would only be a deplorable accident such as is recorded every day in the papers. I should merely be showing you the mechanism of this latest little proof of man's capacity for being deadly, when what you would no doubt call 'the bally thing' went off, and you with it. I promise you that I am quite a good enough shot to hit you so that my story would seem perfectly plausible."

Trevor was clearly disconcerted. Wickliff's manner, as well as his words, carried the conviction that he meant what he said, and that any attempt to rush him and disarm him by force might indeed have a disastrous conclusion. The explanation that he suggested of untoward accident would seem quite possible. His self-confidence was shaken; he was at a loss what to do.

"You think yourself screamingly funny, don't you?" he growled.

"I am quite sure of it," Wickliff retorted briskly; "but you must not take amiss our little difference of opinion, or resent too seriously the introduction of weapons of precision into the argument. When you have any right to pose as Gondoline's champion, then I assure you that I shall give way to you. But till that time comes I shall continue to consider myself her best friend."

At this moment, somewhat to the young man's surprise, the pistol disappeared and Wickliff's manner suddenly changed from the crisply ironic to the expansively hearty.

"I have enjoyed our little chat enormously," he declared jovially, "and found it extremely interesting. I

hope Miss Winbush will not keep you waiting long, and that you will have a good game."

Wickliff's abrupt change of manner had been caused by the thought that he heard the handle of the door on the landing softly turned, and by the certainty that the landing-door did visibly open a little. Gondoline was, for sure, standing craftily behind it with the intention of overhearing what the pair might be saying. He did not wish the girl to think that they had been quarrelling, and he did not think it likely that the young man would be at pains to narrate what had happened. Therefore he continued genially: "If you will excuse me, I shall take a turn in the garden. The fresh air is very tempting."

Indifferent to the muttered "Oh, go to hell!" with which Trevor greeted this announcement of his intentions, Wickliff, still keeping a wary eye upon the angry young gentleman, passed through the French window and strolled slowly out into the garden.

CHAPTER XVII

EUREKA

WICKLIFF lounged to the distant depths of the garden and drifted about there for a while smoking thoughtfully, considering the situation. War had, as it were, been declared between Trevor and himself, but Wickliff did not, upon reflection, regret a condition which he had himself deliberately provoked. Nothing was to be gained by humouring his rival. The solution of the problem depended finally upon Gondoline. She might pledge herself—she might, indeed, already have pledged herself—to Charles Trevor. If she had done so, there was no help for it; nothing left to do except to vituperate his own folly in going to Paris, Zu-zu, Lo-lo, Clo-clo, and all the rest of the experiment. But if she had not done so, Wickliff was convinced from his knowledge of the girl's character that unless her infatuation for young Trevor was very strong indeed, she would be certain, for all her apparent carelessness, to weigh very carefully Wickliff's proposition and to balance very carefully five-and-forty with a fortune and five-and-twenty without a fortune. For five-and-twenty was, as he understood, no more than a clerk in some office in the City, and now in full enjoyment of a temporary holiday.

He spent a few minutes in speculating as to what he would actually have done if Charles Trevor had not been put back by the sight of the pistol and had seriously

attempted to come to grips with him. In all probability he would not have used his weapon, for it would have been foolish to employ it, except with finality. Trevor alive and wounded, would be a staggering denial of the theory which Wickliff had ingeniously propounded to account for an extinct Trevor. But to kill the flannelled fool, and to kill him in the Winbush's hall-sitting-room, would have been a conclusion of the episode too lurid for his fancy.

Wickliff Hersham had neither regard nor contempt for human life in general. For his own life, as far as he could contrive to make it entertaining, he had not exactly a regard—for he valued himself pretty accurately—but a kind of tolerant affection which would never have hindered him from taking essential risks and would always hinder him from taking those unessential. On the few occasions on which he had taken the life of a fellow-being he had felt the same kind of onlooking regret that a mad friend of his, who drank and drabbed himself to death in Callao, told him he had experienced, when he quarreled with a favourite clock and flung it into a glowing fire, where he at once callously and tragically watched it whirring and writhing to extinction. Wickliff had the same sense that an ingenious machine was as it were frustrated.

No, he decided that he would not have employed his automatic pistol if young Trevor had declared war. He did not think that the lad would really have resorted to fisticuffs. He was too essentially a decent young English citizen to proceed to such lengths in another man's house. But if he had, Wickliff would have contented himself with putting a cunning jiu-jitsu catch upon him, and leaving it to him to choose whether he would cry quits or have his arm broken.

Finding that nothing more was to be gained, for the present, by reflection, Wickliff ceased to reflect. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, put it into his pocket and walked slowly back to the house. He felt that it was probable that Gondoline would not be back for luncheon. Convenient little lunches could be had at the Club House for the benefit of enthusiastic tennis-players, and the young folk would probably feast together so as to be able to resume their sport without breaking ground. He would wait about, he thought, and have luncheon with Gregory, and say one or two things he wanted to say.

As it happened, he did not have long to wait about. He had scarcely settled himself into a comfortable chair in the hall-room in company with a picture-paper, before his ease was interrupted by the sound of the turning of a key in a lock. As he sat up the door of the workshop opened a little way and Winbush poked his pink head cautiously through the aperture. Seeing that there was nobody in the room except Wickliff, he darted in swiftly, closing the workshop door behind him. Wickliff saw that the pink face was shining with unusual excitement, which seemed to communicate its agitation to the thin tufts of his fringe of yellow hair. Wickliff nodded a greeting.

"Morning, Greg," he said. "How are things?"

To Wickliff's amused surprise Gregory came towards him with a little skipping step that was almost like dancing, rubbing his hands the while gleefully. When he was close enough he extended his hands and Wickliff rising to the occasion, and from his chair, clasped them in a friendly grasp. When this ceremony was concluded Gregory's delight found expression in speech.

"There is only one word for it, old boy," he chuckled.
"Eureka, just Eureka."

Wickliff smiled as sympathetically as he could at his friend's exultation.

"That is fine," he declared fervently. Then, not having the slightest idea of the cause of his old friend's unwonted high spirits, and thinking it well to obtain illumination, he went on: "Well, what have you found, anyway?"

Gregory pushed Wickliff back into the arm-chair he had chosen, clawed hold of another for himself, and settled down by Wickliff's side.

"First of all," he said eagerly, "I want to thank you most heartily for never having shown the least curiosity as to my work, or asking a single question about it."

"My dear old man," Wickliff protested earnestly, "I gathered from the first that you did not want to talk about it. If you had wanted to talk, you would have talked. As you didn't, I kept quiet. You know that I am never inquisitive about other people's business."

Gregory grinned approval. "I do not suppose," he said, with a cunning bird-like look at his companion, "that you have any idea of what I am up to."

Wickliff shook his head. "Not the faintest," he asserted, and the assurance seemed to gratify Gregory mightily.

"That's good," he declared. "I did not want to talk about what I was doing hitherto. Now I do, if you are willing to listen."

"My dear fellow," Wickliff replied to this appeal, "of course I shall be delighted. Anything that interests you will be sure to interest me." Indeed, he was willing enough to learn the secret of his friend's mysterious

occupation, a secret that had been so religiously kept even from Gondoline.

Gregory laid an impressive hand upon his listener's knee, and made his announcement with an air of portentous gravity. "I have been working on an airship."

Wickliff found himself unable to restrain a slight smile at the preternatural gravity of Winbush's manner, and the unimportance, as it seemed to him, of his matter.

"Isn't that the occupation of nine men out of every ten at this present minute?" he asked, and laughed again as he questioned.

Gregory took no notice of his friend's hilarity. He went on as if Wickliff had said nothing.

"I should say that I have been working on the airship"—he accentuated the definite article frenziedly—"the perfect airship, and I have got it, man, got it."

Wickliff was still not greatly impressed by his friend's communication, but he saw plainly that he was expected to be, and he made a desperate effort to show a proper interest.

"Have you?" he asked, with an air that he tried to make other than one of polite indifference.

Winbush stared at him in an unfeigned amazement, which made it clear to Wickliff that he was not at all behaving as his friend expected him to behave. He leaped to his feet and confronted Wickliff almost fiercely.

"Great heavens!" he screamed; "how can you sit there like that, after what I have told you?"

The little man was more excited than Wickliff could have believed it possible for him to be. His light eyes were shining like glass in the sun. His face was fiercely red. His scanty locks seemed, to Wickliff's surprised fancy, to quiver on his head like small flames. His fingers were twitching jerkily and every limb was trembling.

"I never spoke to you of this before," he cried, in a thin, eager voice that sounded as if he were letting-off steam, "because I did not wish to speak to a soul until I was sure. But now I am sure, quite, quite sure."

There was something contagious in Gregory's excitement, and Wickliff stared at him with an interest which was now wholly unfeigned. "Sure of what?" he asked, and was amazed to note the ring of eagerness in his own voice.

"The Conquest of the Air," Gregory shouted. "The Conquest of the Air."

"What do you mean?" Wickliff said. "I thought that was ancient history by this time."

Winbush shook his head vehemently, and the little flames of hair danced again.

"No, no!" he cried, "all that's nothing. Plenty of fellows have tried their hands at it, and plenty of lives have been given for the experiments, but I have got it. Gregory Winbush has got it. My God, he's got it!"

The little man was so flushed and voluble, so unusual in his exuberance of enthusiasm, that Wickliff began to feel some concern for his state of health. He got up and laid a hand affectionately upon the inventor's shaking shoulder, and there was anxiety in his look as he spoke to him in a soothing voice, much as he might have spoken to a fractious child.

"All right, old man," he said gently, "all right. Tell us all about it; but tell it quietly, so that I shall be able to understand it. But first sit down and be comfortable."

He gently pressed Gregory back into the arm-chair that he had vacated in his outburst, and resumed his own place by his side, watching him attentively. Winbush had never seemed to him, in the brief period of

their renewed acquaintance, to be either a faddist or a crank, nor one whose balance of mind would be easily unsettled. He was commonplace, he was fussy, he was occasionally fretful, but he had never before been seen to burn with the fanatic fires of the imaginative discoverer. Wickliff felt sorry for him in a way; he seemed such a pathetic, limp, tremulous figure now as he sat huddled there in the arm-chair, his fingers and limbs still fidgeting, his eyes unnaturally bright, and his cheeks so hotly coloured.

Winbush seemed to have no appreciation of Wickliff's anxiety. All he wanted to do now was to talk, and talk he did with great rapidity. It seemed as if he had kept his work, his purpose, his hopes so long pent-up that he was eager to liberate his mind of his secret. With the rapidity of a cataract he flowed over Wickliff in a copious, comprehensive history of man's attempt at aviation. Great names danced on the waves of his eloquence like bobbing buoys that marked a course. From Dædalus to Leonardo da Vinci, from da Vinci to Lilenthal, from Lilenthal to Santos Dumont and the Wrights, Gregory Winbush ranged, relating with a fire and vigour for which Wickliff would never have given him credit the astonishing chronicle of man's magnificent struggle with the Prince of the Power of the Air.

Wickliff knew little or nothing about the subject. There had been flying shows at Buenos Ayres, but he had not bothered about them. His own business had been so very much with the earth and of the earth that he had neither time nor inclination to bother himself about the adventurers of the sky. He remembered a man who performed at the *Palacio* with a kind of toy aeroplane, and the man had tried to explain it to Wickliff, who was not greatly interested, and afterwards the toy

aeroplane came to grief and hurt a member of the audience who happened to be a prominent citizen of Buenos Ayres, and in consequence Wickliff was more convinced than ever of the foolishness of the whole business.

But now, as he sat under the douche of Gregory's unexpected eloquence the thing did not seem so foolish. Gregory's narrative was not merely pictorial; it was amplified and intensified by explanations which Winbush made as simple and unscientific as possible to suit an unscientific audience, and Wickliff found himself admitting to his surprise, that the whole business seemed more practical and feasible than he had ever been willing to believe. He listened with an unexpected thrill to the noble catalogue of martyrs who had given their lives for the cause that once had seemed so hopeless, and that now Wickliff felt compelled to admit, captivated by the fascination of an inventor's enthusiasm, was not without hope. But when Winbush paused in his flood of words, stopping his story at the point at which aviation stood yesterday, it still seemed to him, in spite of the impression that Gregory's facts had made upon him, that though great advances had been made and great achievements recorded, and great prices paid for those advances and achievements, nevertheless that Conquest of the Air of which Winbush had spoken so proudly was still very far away.

He said as much to Gregory, and Gregory, who was gasping for breath after shooting the rapids of his waterfall of words, only smiled and winked knowingly.

"That is where I come in," he said, and was silent for a few minutes, partly to allow himself to recover his voice, and partly to allow all that he had been saying to soak properly into Wickliff's mind and make him ready for the great announcement. Then he began again.

"What you say is very true," he admitted, "and it has been said a great many times, but it's not going to be said any more unless I am very much mistaken."

The use of these words sent a sympathetic pang through Wickliff. How if Winbush were mistaken; how if he had not accomplished the triumph, whatever it might be, which he believed himself to have accomplished? A man who could be worked up into such a frenzied condition by the conviction that he had made a monumental discovery would be sure to be dashed very dismally to the deeps if it came about that his dreamed discovery was a myth after all. Wickliff felt a great kindness for the little vehement man and found himself wishing, with unfamiliar zeal for another's welfare, that Winbush's dream might prove a reality.

Gregory was talking again furiously:

"A great deal of nonsense has been talked about the conquest of the air. Aviation has hustled along a good bit in this blessed twentieth century, but the air isn't conquered yet, not by a long chalk. When a Frenchman skips across the Channel like a blooming bird and Loraine comes back safe and sound from one of his adventurous cruises, and Grahame White goes on beating records, and the conditions of our annual war game are altered by the increased facilities which aviation affords for one force to learn the numbers and movements of the other, then people write in the papers that the conquest of the air has been achieved. Bah!"

Mr. Winbush, flushed by his long-winded volubility, slackened speed and drew breath. Wickliff mused on the transformatory influence of knowledge. Old Gregory had seemed to him, hitherto, as commonplace and unimportant a little man as ever was in the world. But now, dealing with his own topic, primed with his own

experience, he seemed to speak with the exaltation of a prophet and to wield the sceptre of power. Wickliff did not mentally put it in exactly that way, but that was, broadly speaking, the effect that Winbush now produced upon him. He decided that the whole business was devilish rum.

Winbush had by this time recovered his wind, so to speak, and it was evident that he had more to say, and fully intended to say it. Wickliff did not mind. He was extremely interested, not so much in what Gregory might have discovered as in what he had discovered in Gregory.

"But when men drop from the sky like flies from the ceiling, when pilot after pilot perishes miserably, when our army loses man after man of its best and bravest, when from every corner of the world the wires bring daily reports of some new addition to the death-roll, we should do well not to be so lippy about the conquest of the air. For the conquest is on the wrong side then. The men who lie under their ruined machines, shattered to pieces, burned beyond recognition, the men who drown in the sea, with nothing perhaps but some floating cap to tell the tale of how they disappeared, the men who fly in foul winds to gratify a greedy crowd and die for their own foolhardiness and the greed of others, these men are heroes, these men are martyrs—but they have not conquered the air. They are the brave victims of a forlorn hope; they are like the soldiers that pile bags of gunpowder against a besieged gate and are ready to be blown to pieces, so long as they effect a breach in the walls. They may help to win the day, but they haven't won it."

Wickliff said nothing. He just listened, and admired and nodded assent. The little man reminded him oddly

of some of those Sunday fanatics he had sometimes listened to in Hyde Park, fanatics for religion, fanatics against religion, but each man fiercely impressed with the importance of his own particular mission, and each man inspired with a kind of eloquence by the sheer stress of his belief.

Winbush continued:

"Now I was out to stop all that waste if I could, and I can and I will. I suppose you don't know much about the principles of aviation?"

"I know exactly nothing," Wickliff answered. "All I know about the subject I have learned in the last few minutes from what you have been saying."

"I shall not be technical," Gregory promised. "Now you may or may not know that one of the hardest problems to be solved by flyers is the problem of stabilization. The flying man wants to be able to poise as a seagull can poise; he wants to be able to stand still in the air for as long a time as he pleases; he wants to be able to sail an even keel in the wildest weather. The way to attain this desired result has been sought for again and again by means of an automatic stabilizer, which shall do for the flying man what he now has to do for himself, and do things for him which he cannot now even try to do."

"I see," Wickliff observed, gathering from Gregory's pause that he was expected to say something.

"So far the perfect automatic stabilizer has seemed as unattainable as the philosopher's stone, or the elixir of life, or the square of the circle, or any other dream. Lots of people have had a shy at it, but none of them has brought it off. Dunphy's Stabilizer is no good, Leroux's is no good, Thorwald's is no good, Steinberg's is no good, Cardini's is no good. They aren't automatic,

and they don't stabilize, and the whole bunch of them aren't worth a packet of pins. Well, to make a long story short, I have invented the perfect stabilizer."

Wickliff was beginning to realize the importance of this announcement. "The devil you have," he said and whistled.

"I have," Winbush repeated emphatically and triumphantly. "It will revolutionize the whole question of aviation; it will alter the whole condition of things. This is what I have been going for ever since the beginning of the century, and this is what I have got at last. Other things were done by other people, things that helped the game. I pegged away at my purpose, which was to win the game. I know that I have won it to-day."

"But how," Wickliff asked, "have you been able to achieve this result without experiments in the open?"

"Experiments in the open wouldn't have suited me," Winbush replied. "It is practically impossible to ensure secrecy and safety from all observation for experiments in the open. And for me secrecy and safety from observation were the very essence of my enterprise. I wanted to do something wonderful; I wanted to make a name that should be remembered as long as men fly in the air. Winbush's Stabilizer will make me immortal."

Gregory positively glowed as he spoke, and for a moment Wickliff felt something like envy of him, envy of his patience, his determination, his zeal for his work, his pride in the result. He reflected that any invention must be a good thing that afforded so much satisfaction to its inventor.

"I am curious to know how you managed it all," he declared.

"Model work," Winbush answered gleefully, "model

work. From the first I was resolved to work by model and so ensure privacy, secrecy. Of course, the great difficulty always in model work is to get anything like the same conditions to prevail for the model as for the finished machine. Many full-sized machines, built to scale from models that were successful in the workshop, have proved hopeless failures in the open."

"That must be a bit discouraging," Wickliff suggested.

Winbush did not seem to hear him.

"I got over all difficulties," he said. "That workshop there of mine is fitted up in a way that would astonish you, or, at least, that would astonish you if you understood all about aerodynamics and aerostatics. I have appliances there worked by electricity, by which I can reproduce at will, on a small scale, any possible atmospheric condition. Calm, storm, cross-currents, pockets, zephyrs, hurricanes, rain, lightning—anything and everything. There isn't any kind of weather that I cannot reproduce for myself there for as long as I please."

"It sounds like Maskelyne and Devant," Wickliff hazarded.

"I won't try to explain to you how all this is accomplished," Gregory proceeded, "for it would take too long, and would be much too technical. You must take all that for granted. But at least you can easily understand that with such means at my disposal I could study the evolutions of my models under all conceivable conditions. As my model might behave in the petty storms of my workshop, so the machine made to scale would behave in the real storms of the sky. With infinite pains and after years of experiments I have at last evolved my perfect Stabilizer."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DAYS OF LONG AGO

HE paused to take breath and looked at Wickliff to observe the effect of his confidence upon his hearer. Wickliff gave a long whistle.

"Well, if you are right," he said, "it looks very likely that you have solved the problem of the conquest of the air."

Winbush wagged his head more emphatically than ever. "I am right," he announced, with an air of pride that contrasted oddly with his insignificant personality, "and I have solved the problem of the conquest of the air. With the aid of my contrivance a man can ride more securely in the air than a man can ride on his bicycle in the road, for the bicyclist can't stand still and remain with his machine in poise, and my flyer can. I tell you my discovery will alter the conditions of life all over the world. The nation that owns it and applies it will command war and peace—at all events until such time as some cleverer chap than I comes along with a cleverer invention. But to do that will take some time; and in the meantime here I am with my little invention, all ready to make its owner the master of the situation. Bit of triumph for your old friend, eh?"

"How did all this come about?" Wickliff asked.
"What put the idea of the thing into your head?"

"Why, you know," Gregory answered, "I was always a bit inventive, even as a boy."

Wickliff nodded. His memory travelled back to the days of that S.E. academy for young gentlemen, and he recalled the queer articles that Gregory was always making with wood and wire and string. There was a mouse-trap which he recollects, and many kinds of puzzles, and, best of all, there was that improvement which Gregory devised for the tills in his father's emporium. Gregory's fond parent took out a patent for that improvement, and made money. Winbush's patent was superseded by now, but it had had its day, and a good one.

"I remember," Wickliff said.

"After I married Gondoline," Winbush began again; then he paused for a moment and eyed his friend furtively. "You don't mind me talking of that now, do you?"

Wickliff laughed frankly. "Not a bit," he declared. "That hurt healed long ago. Fire ahead."

Gregory fired ahead.

"Well, Gondoline did not exactly sympathize with my little aspirations. Poor Gondoline! I am afraid she found me a trifle—shall I say?—dispiriting. She was always the one for noise and brightness, you know. She wanted life to be all pleasuring, and parties, and theatres, and music-halls, especially music-halls."

Wickliff received the information with composure, even with approval. People who liked music-halls had been very useful to him, and he thought of the *Palacio* affectionately.

"Music-halls are very good things, too," he asserted. Winbush scratched his chin meditatively.

"Do you think so?" he questioned doubtfully. "Do you know, I never could see much fun in them. I always used to get a bit dozy-like when a fat man with a

red nose pretended to be a washer-woman, who said beer and kippers were so good for her spasms."

Wickliff smiled.

"I know the kind of thing," he admitted. He reflected with satisfaction that he had had no use for that kind of turn at the *Palacio*.

Gregory seemed to drop for a moment into a meditative mood.

"Poor Gondoline!" he mused; "it was a pity"—he paused, and added thoughtfully—"for her that she did not live to see the picture palaces. How she would have enjoyed them!"

Wickliff liked picture palaces. He had made plenty of money out of them. He thought of the private one he had run at Buenos Ayres and smiled at the memory. He thought, too, that after all Gondoline would have been better suited to him than to Winbush. However, he was heartily glad that things were as they were.

Gregory turned to Wickliff with a curious smile, amused and cunning.

"Do you remember how we used to think that Gondoline was romantic when we used to walk with her in the garden at the Grove?"

Wickliff laughed again. There was no bitterness in his laughter, no bitterness in his recollections of the lost Gondoline. He had enough to occupy him in the Gondoline he had found.

"I remember," he said.

"If she had lived," Gregory continued reflectively, "I do not suppose that she would have stayed long with me. She was a bit too dashing for me—I found that out soon enough—and there were several fellows hanging about who admired her a lot, and sooner or later she would have taken her hook, I expect. Between you

and me, I should have preferred it sooner. . . ." He paused a moment, then resumed: "Funny thing that you and I were rivals, and that I was the chosen man."

It did not seem at all surprising to Wickliff, who knew the reason and gave it.

"You had a thousand a year," he said sententiously.

"That is true," Gregory agreed. "Gondoline was practical. I am quite sure she would never have left me for anyone who had not at least as much to offer. Anyhow, she did not get the chance, poor thing, and when she was gone I took to inventing again to distract me."

"Were you fond of her?" Wickliff asked, not unsympathetically. It was strange to think and talk of that time which seemed so very long ago, and to contrast the different lives of the late Gondoline's rivals.

"I suppose I was," Gregeory replied; "but she was a bit hard to live up to, if you take my meaning—the music-halls and all that kind of thing, the music-halls especially. I did get a sickener of them. By the way, it was the music-halls that first put the thing I have been doing into my head."

Wickliff looked some surprise at this piece of information.

"How was that?" he asked.

Gregory explained: "One night, when Gondoline was at her jolliest, and when I was feeling a little more than ordinarily dull and out of it with her and her jolly friends, we were all at one of the halls together, and a chap came on and began singing a song about all the impossible things that would happen when the pigs began to fly."

Wickliff nodded and Gregory rambled on:

"Mr. Gladstone would carry Home Rule, and we

would love the Russian Bear, and women would wear trousers—you know the kind of piffle. I was dozing in my stall, sick of the whole silly business, and of Gondoline's rather noisy laughter with her pals—we had dined rather well at the 'Holborn' before going on—when I was roused a bit by one of his blessed rhymes:

‘We'll have ships to sail the sky
When the pigs begin to fly.’

Those, I think, were the very words, and they somehow stuck in my head and put an idea into it, and it has been there ever since, and it gave me a purpose in life.”

Wickliff shifted a little in his chair to obtain a better view of the little man. Evidently there was more in Gregory than he had suspected. “Lucky man,” was his comment.

“Of course, nothing came of it at the moment,” Winbush continued; “but I lost poor Gondoline not long after that, and then I took it up seriously. You may remember that I was always a bit of a practical man, took in Cassell's ‘Technical Educator,’ and went to lectures at the Polytechnic, and that sort of caper. Of course, all that I had learned in that way wasn't much, but it gave me a grounding, as it were, and I resolved to go in for the flight question solid.”

“How long ago was that?” Wickliff asked. He was really more interested than amused by this singular revelation of the little man's unexpected force of character.

Gregory reflected. “About sixteen years ago, I suppose. Gondoline was still a baby, and I had plenty of time to myself, and could fill it in as I pleased. At that time, you know, people who went in for flying were only feeling their way, so to speak, and most of them were

more inclined to put their money on the dirigible than on the aeroplane."

Wickliff looked as wise as he could, and accorded a silent assent to his friend's statements. The silent assent was all that Winbush needed. Now that he had permitted himself to break into flood he was anxious to monopolize the conversation.

"I liked the aeroplane best myself," he went on, "though I wasn't bigoted on the matter, and I went in hard for the study of them. At that time Langley was making his experiments on the *Potomac*, and eight years earlier Maxim had made the big experiment which counted for so much. But Maxim hadn't done the trick, and Langley hadn't done the trick, and Manley didn't do the trick. These were all magnificent failures; but, for all that, I felt that the trick could be done, and I had a firm conviction that I could do it, or at all events help to do it."

"If you have done what you say you have done," Wickliff observed, "you certainly have helped."

"Of course I have done what I say I have done," the little man responded testily, "and I have helped more than I ever hoped or dreamed when I began. Of course, I soon let the aeroplane itself alone. That was moving fast enough—too fast for me to compete with. What I did was to specialize on my Stabilizer, and that's where I have succeeded, and that's where I come in."

"It must have been a devilish difficult business," Wickliff suggested.

"Difficult!" Winbush shouted, "difficult! I can't begin to tell you how difficult it was. In fact, if I did begin to tell you, you wouldn't understand."

Wickliff was amused at the sudden reversal of their relative positions, and the air of patronizing superiority

which Gregory Winbush, the inventor of genius, had unconsciously adopted toward Wickliff Hersham, the soldier of fortune.

"Devil a bit!" he admitted frankly. Gregory shone upon him in the effulgence of authority.

"I did not understand it much myself when I began, but I do now. Lord bless you! It is as easy as anything else if you give a mind and a life to it."

Wickliff found it hard to associate this view with what he knew, or thought he knew, of Winbush.

"I suppose so," he admitted. "Is it as interesting?"

"My dear fellow," Gregory answered rapturously, "I can't begin to tell you how interesting it is! At first, you feel as if you were bang up against impossibilities, fighting with all the primal forces of nature; but after a bit of being knocked down and getting up again, you begin to fancy that you are a primal force yourself."

Wickliff found it hard to regard the little bird-like man as a primal force, but he did not betray his difficulty with a smile. Gregory glowed with enthusiasm.

"I can tell you that I did get knocked down more times than I can count. Thing after thing went wrong. Experiment after experiment failed hopelessly. Plan after plan that seemed practical on paper proved valueless in application. But I always got up again—oh, yes, I always got up again."

CHAPTER XIX

THE UNION

GREGORY beamed in his triumph; he looked like some smiling pink idol. Wickliff caressed his chin thoughtfully. If his friend were justified in his exaltation, he began to appreciate the serious consequences which must result from his discovery. All that had been vaguely predicted, vaguely promised, vaguely hoped for these winged engines of the unstable air would now be realized, accomplished, a matter of precision. Wickliff was not an imaginative man, and while the problem had been far from solution, he had paid it very little attention. But now it was different: the unexpected had come to pass; the unlikely was an established fact. His practical nature apprised the significance of the result, interpreted into definite terms the consequences of the achievement. He looked at the smiling pink idol with an admiration that was not untouched with a sense of terror.

"Don't you feel any compunctions," he asked, "for the consequences that may follow from this infernal machine of yours?"

The beatific smile faded from the idol's face. Gregory Winbush was himself again, a successful inventor irritated at any criticism of his invention.

"Compunctions!" he cried indignantly. "Why should I feel compunctions? If I am allowed to invent a thing it is right that I should invent it. Did the man feel

compunction who invented cannon or corsets, or patent pills, or any other deadlinesses?"

He was silent for a moment, staggered by the audacity, and the folly of Wickliff's suggestion.

"No, no, no," he insisted, "the world has got to move."

"Even to its own destruction?" Wickliff asked, and flattered himself that he had put a poser.

Gregory, annoyed at the futility of the turn the conversation had taken, only answered with an emphatic nod.

Wickliff responded to the signal with a gravity unusual to him.

"Well, I never thought myself particularly squeamish, but if I had a job like yours on hand I should think twice before I finished it."

Gregory looked at his friend with astonishment tempered with contempt and compassion.

"Think twice, indeed!" he snorted. "And while I was humming and hawing, some other fellow might hit upon my idea who wouldn't be such a blithering idiot as to think twice, and where should I be then?"

Undeterred by the obvious disapproval of his friend, Wickliff pursued his train of thought.

"You never have nightmares of burning cities and sinking ships and shrieking people?"

"No, no, no," Gregory shrieked at him furiously, striking his clenched right hand into his open left as he spoke. "My Stabilizer is me, I tell you. I have given it my life and my thoughts and my work and my love for all these years, and I would go on with it if it meant all that you said just now. If it meant all that and more—if it meant the destruction of the world and the whole planetary system."

He jerked himself from the arm-chair as he spoke and began rapidly to perambulate the room, swinging his arms as he walked. Wickliff followed his movements with wonder.

"You are indeed an enthusiast," he said.

Winbush came back to a halt. He had walked off some of his excitement and could speak comparatively calmly.

"I should not be an inventor if I weren't. My business is to invent, not to consider the possible consequences of my invention. Just think of what I have done. I shall be remembered, I tell you, as long as the world endures."

"If you allow it to endure," Wickliff interrupted. The sarcasm was lost on Winbush, whose thoughts seemed to have drifted off into a new direction.

"And to think," he appealed, "that Gondoline always said I was a duffer."

There was a brief silence in the room while Winbush enjoyed his pride in having refuted the aspersions of the departed Gondoline, and Wickliff found himself speculating upon the endless varieties of human nature. Wickliff broke the silence.

"Gregory, old man," he said, with sincere commiseration, "I am very sorry for you."

Winbush came to the surface of his pool of self-satisfaction and gaped at the speaker in amazement.

"What for?" he asked, and his tone seemed to challenge the possibility of anyone feeling sorry for the man who had done what he had done.

Wickliff shrugged his shoulders.

"You have realized your dream," he said. "You have gratified your ambition. You have nothing else to live for."

This was a point of view that had not occurred to Winbush, and he promptly resented it.

"Oh, yes I have," he protested. "Now that I am sure of my ground, or rather of my air"—and he chuckled complacently at his mild joke—"I shall approach the Government; convince them of the practicability of my scheme, and get them to advance the necessary funds for a repetition of my model on a life-size scale, and for experiments in the open on Government grounds."

Wickliff gazed at Winbush in amazement.

"You do not hope for anything from the Government, do you?" he asked, as one that puts a question which can only have one possible answer.

"Why not?" Gregory answered, puzzled and flustered. "Do I not control the only stabilizer in the world?"

"If you are right," Wickliff retorted, "there are others who will believe in you, and treat with you long before you can persuade our muddle-headed folk to believe that there is anything in your invention."

Gregory smiled a smile of superior wisdom.

"I shan't give them the chance. Nobody knows—except yourself—a thing about my invention, or shall know about it until I get into communication with the War Office."

Wickliff looked and was incredulous.

"Do you really mean to say that in all these years you have never breathed a word to any human being of what you were trying for?"

"Never," Winbush responded emphatically, but he almost immediately tempered the emphasis by adding: "Practically never."

The emendation made Wickliff alert.

"Come, now," he demanded, "what does 'practically never' mean?"

Gregory explained:

"In the beginning, years ago, when I was first tackling the job, I took some part in a correspondence in *Nature* on the 'Heavier than Air' question. There was nothing in that. The 'Heavier than Air' question was settled long ago."

"Well," Wickliff asked, "is that the sum total of your public communications?"

Gregory searched his memory.

"A good bit later," he admitted, "when I was beginning to get a real hang of the thing I intended to do—it was about the time that Gondoline came home from school for good, I think—I adumbrated some of my ideas in a letter to the *Science Journal*, but I did not give myself away at all, and I have advanced enormously since then."

Wickliff looked at him quizzically. "Did you sign that paper of yours?"

"Why, of course."

Wickliff went on, still quizzical: "And put your address, maybe?"

"And put my address, certainly. I am proud of this house, and this house, which I believe has many memories to be proud of, is going to be proud of me. But there is nothing in all this."

"Do you really think so?" Wickliff queried. "I will bet you a fiver to a five-shilling-piece that one European Power has its eye on you already."

Gregory started. "What Power?" he asked. Then he suddenly realized Wickliff's meaning, and puffed like a hungry seal. "God bless me! you don't mean to say you really think so?"

"You bet I think so," Wickliff affirmed. "I tell you, old man, there is nothing we do over here that is worth knowing that those fellows don't know about."

"The deuce there isn't," Winbush observed dismally, and yet there was a touch of pride in his dejection, an unconscious hint of a thread of gold among the grey. To think that the humble worker in the discreet suburb was the object of anxious interest to a great empire had its bewildering thrill.

"What prying fellows they must be!"

"Small blame to them, say I," Wickliff retorted. "It's an up-to-date nation's business to know what other nations are up to. If we were as clever as they are we would know everything that they are doing, and it would be worth the knowing, I can tell you. But we aren't as clever as they are, and so we don't know a lot of things that would be precious useful to us."

Gregory looked suspicious.

"I suppose you know what you are talking about?" he barked. "I suppose you are sure of your facts?"

"Pretty sure," Wickliff replied composedly. "I knew one of them out in Buenos Ayres. He and I were pretty good pals. He did a turn with performing cockatoos, which was pretty good for those who like those kind of turns. Personally I don't; I think they're rotten."

Winbush was glaring at Wickliff.

"I don't think I quite follow," he complained.

Wickliff rallied.

"I beg your pardon. Well, this fellow could drink pretty well anything that mortal man ever converted into alcohol. It used to amuse me to try and make him drunk, and the harder I tried the harder he drank and the less effect his liquor had upon him. But at last I

got hold of some aguardiente that was very old—the stunning stuff they used to make at Coronda, you know—and stiffened it with all kinds of strong cordials. By Jove! it was a drink for a giant. Well, I turned that on to him at the end of a heavy bout, and by the time he had finished a bottle of it he was talkative. He began to gas a great deal about the glories of the Fatherland; I began to gas back about the glories of the Motherland. Then he began to laugh, said that they knew all about us, that there was a little army of observers in our midst, unsuspected, who observed everything and reported everything that was worth observing and reporting."

Gregory gasped.

"Did he say the same when he was sober?" he asked anxiously.

"Certainly not. When he was sober he said nothing. But his words stuck in my memory. On the boat coming home I met a man who has something to do with our Intelligence Department, and I asked him if he thought there was any truth in what my friend with the cockatoos had said."

"What did our man in the Intelligence Department say?" Winbush questioned twitteringly.

"Said he thought it was pretty true, that the organization wasn't nominally official, but was worked by a mysterious 'Verein' or union whose business it was to find out important secrets and sell them to their Government. In his opinion our friends of this union have some five thousand men regularly employed in England, keeping an eye on us. I should say that someone out of that five thousand has an eye upon you."

Gregory looked flustered and discomposed.

"I cannot believe it," he protested, "but if I could

bring myself to believe it, I should say it was a most infamous proceeding."

"Why? why? why?" Wickliff asked, a little impatient with his old friend's self-righteous indignation. "Suppose that some foreign fellow had pitched on your idea, and was working it out in a suburb of some great foreign city, and suppose some hint of the work he was on had got out through letters to the scientific press or otherwise, and suppose some young Englishman had the wit to steal that secret for our benefit, wouldn't we all applaud him loudly? Why, of course we should; but we do not get the chance, damn it!"

Mr. Winbush seemed impressed by this view of the case, and he appeared to be turning it over in his mind with the intention of finding some suitable answer. But at that moment Gondoline came gaily in, contradicting Wickliff's anticipations. She had returned to luncheon after all. The girl's arrival of course put an end to the conversation she had interrupted, and the three talked of other things.

CHAPTER XX

A FRIENDLY CHAT

AFTER luncheon Winbush retreated into his workshop as usual. It was plain that even if he had accomplished his purpose, or believed he had accomplished it, he must still be busy about his task. When he had disappeared and the familiar sound of the key turning in the lock was heard, Gondoline, who had been ostentatiously amiable and talkative throughout the course of the meal, suddenly turned a frowning face upon Wickliff. Wickliff had been expecting this action and met the frown with a smile.

"Look here," Gondoline began, "I've got a bone to pick with you, Wicky."

Wickliff extracted his pipe from one pocket, and his tobacco-pouch from another, and looked at her lazily through half-opened eyes. "Pick, dear child, pick," he murmured.

Gondoline pinked with irritation. "Don't call me dear child," she commanded. "Please to remember for the future that I am a grown-up young woman."

Wickliff laid down his pipe and his pouch, fumbled in his breast-pocket and produced an envelope. From another pocket he extracted a lead pencil.

Gondoline watched these proceedings with annoyed curiosity. "What on earth are you doing?" she said querulously.

Wickliff proceeded to write a few words upon the

back of the envelope before he answered her. "Making a note. Here it is: 'Please to remember for the future that Gondoline is a grown-up young woman.' "

"I suppose you think that is funny," Gondoline snapped, "but it isn't."

Wickliff denied the imputation.

"I don't think it is funny in the least, but I think it a highly necessary and prudent precaution."

"Why, may I ask?" Gondoline asked, with a manner of aggressive politeness.

"Because," Wickliff answered, "if I didn't make a note of your statement I should find it very difficult to remember."

Gondoline seized upon a piece of toast with the patent intention of throwing it at her companion's head. Wickliff's eyes widened with delight, and his visible pleasure reminded Gondoline in time that the casting of toast at an offending individual was not a becoming action for a grown-up young woman. She restored the triangle of toast to its rack.

"Strike," Wickliff appealed. "Strike, but hear me."

"I don't want to hear you at present," Gondoline retorted. "It is I who want to do the talking just now, thank you."

Wickliff lit his pipe slowly, watching her through the rising clouds with mirth in his eyes. The mirth and the leisurely process of lighting-up irritated Gondoline.

"Talk away, grown-up young woman," he said at length, when his pipe was as it should be.

Gondoline folded her arms and surveyed Wickliff with a look which she believed to be charged with scornful determination, and which she intended to have the effect of crushing him. But Wickliff did not appear in the least crushed.

"What were you and Mr. Trevor talking about this morning when I was out of the room?"

Wickliff knit his brows as if he were making a prodigious effort to recall a lost conversation.

"Let me see. What were we talking about? If I remember rightly, I believe your bright young friend began with some illuminating remark about the weather."

Gondoline sniffed.

"It is foolish of you to call him bright——" Gondoline began sourly.

Wickliff interrupted her.

"It was foolish. I apologize. It shan't occur again."

Gondoline gave him a glance which a conscientious basilisk, anxious to do his work thoroughly, might have envied.

"It is foolish of you to call him bright in that sneering tone of voice," she resumed. "As a matter of fact, he is bright, very much brighter than some people I know."

"There are degrees in everything," Wickliff murmured. He did not seem called upon to say anything more, and there was a short silence. Wickliff appeared to be falling asleep. Gondoline aroused him by tapping the table sharply with a spoon. Wickliff looked lazily up.

"You haven't told me," Gondoline said severely.

Wickliff pretended to pull himself together.

"Told you what?"

"What I asked you just now? What you and Mr. Trevor were talking about this morning?"

"I told you that we were discussing the weather."

"You can't have been discussing the weather all the time. What else did you talk about?"

Wickliff shook his head helplessly.

"I can't recall anything but the weather," he protested. "The weather is always such an absorbing subject when two Englishmen encounter."

"I don't believe you," Gondoline said emphatically.

Wickliff raised his eyebrows to suggest that he was pained and surprised.

"That is very rude," he declared. "Why do you want to know the details of an uninteresting conversation?"

"Are you sure it was uninteresting?"

"Quite sure."

Wickliff made to settle down to his pipe again, but Gondoline would not allow this.

"As I was coming out of my room," she said, "I heard voices in the hall, your voice and Mr. Trevor's and they seemed to me to be unnecessarily loud. But when I got to the door on the landing I stood at the door for a minute" ("I know you did," Wickliff commented mentally). "All I heard was that you were hoping that he would have a fine game or some tosh of that kind."

"That seems amiable enough," Wickliff murmured approvingly. "Then I went into the garden. What happened after that? Did you ask Mr. Trevor what we had been talking about?"

"Of course I did."

"And what did he tell you?" Wickliff inquired, with a certain curiosity of which he showed no sign.

"Oh, he said you hadn't been talking of anything in particular."

"There you are," Wickliff cried triumphantly. "What did I tell you?" In his mind he decided that Trevor seemed to be playing the game, and so far he applauded him.

"I don't believe either of you are telling the truth," Gondoline decided. "But it's silly of you to quarrel with Mr. Trevor."

"Why?" Wickliff uttered his monosyllable with an air of patient desire for enlightenment.

"Because that won't make me like him any the less," the girl said tightly, "or like you any the more."

Wickliff straightened himself up and laid his pipe upon a convenient plate.

"That's true enough," he conceded. "Look here, Gondoline, you are a sensible girl, and you know what I think of you, or I shouldn't have asked you to marry me this morning. Has Mr. Trevor asked you to marry him?"

Gondoline flushed a little, but she faced Wickliff's gaze steadily enough.

"No, not yet. But I feel pretty sure that he will, if I give him half a chance."

"Do you mean to give him half a chance?"

"That's as it may be."

"If you do, and he takes it, have you made up your mind as to your answer?"

Gondoline looked uncomfortable and fiddled nervously with the spoon which she had used so effectively a little while before as a gavel.

"I don't know. It depends upon such a lot of things."

Wickliff continued his cross-examination with an air of detached interest.

"Is there any understanding between you?"

"I know that he admires me very much," Gondoline said with a smirk, "and I have taken quite a fancy to him."

"But you are not what poetic people call betrothed?"

"No," Gondoline answered, still busy with her spoon.

"Of course, it's really no business of mine," Wickliff said indifferently, "but I should advise you not to take any decided step for the present."

"Why not?" Gondoline asked pertly.

Wickliff answered her suavely.

"Because I want you to be quite sure that you know your own mind. You have taken a fancy to this young man just as I have taken a fancy to you."

"Taken a fancy, indeed!" Gondoline interrupted, with her nose very much in the air.

"Yes, taken a fancy to you; got stuck on you, mashed, however you like to put it. Now, of course, if you can't return the compliment, why, there is no more to be said. I thought you were a bit keen on me, but it won't break my heart if I find that I fancied you were keener than you are. But I should be awfully sorry to see you make a fool of yourself."

"I am not likely to do that, I assure you," Gondoline said with great dignity.

Wickliff laughed.

"Little girls—of course, I mean grown-up young women—always think that, but they do manage to make howling fools of themselves now and then nevertheless. You mustn't do that, Gondoline, for it would really annoy me very much to think that I was mistaken in my judgment of you."

"You seem to attach a great deal of importance to your judgment," Gondoline said sourly.

"I have always regarded you as a sensible, level-headed girl, and I should be sorry to see you make an impulsive mistake. But as I said before, it's no business of mine. You must please yourself, after all."

He quitted his seat with the air of one that is about

to take his departure. Gondoline watched him with a vexed expression.

"What are you doing this afternoon, Wicky?"

"I've got a bridge party at the club," he answered, making for the door.

"I have got nothing to do this afternoon," Gondoline complained. There was invitation in her voice.

Wickliff shook his head.

"Dear me, that's bad. Remember the proverb about 'idle hands.'"

Wickliff's own hand was busy with the door-handle. Gondoline looked pettish.

"Can't you give up your old bridge this afternoon and amuse me?" she asked insinuatingly.

Wickliff looked concerned.

"I'm awfully sorry, but I can't possibly. They're expecting me, and I must nip along."

He was turning the handle as he spoke. The door opened and closed. Wickliff had vanished, leaving Gondoline feeling very cross indeed.

CHAPTER XXI

A BOW DRAWN AT A VENTURE

FOR the next few days life, as far as our few personal friends are concerned, was uneventful at Brindling Common. Gondoline and young Trevor were very much together. There was always time for a game of tennis as soon as he got back from the City; and he came in to dinner frequently; and if he did not come in to dinner he came in after dinner and shared what he called the "post-prandial coffee" in the hall.

Wickliff and he were perfectly urbane in their manner towards each other. It was as if they had tacitly agreed to ignore, to forget, to bury in oblivion their little tit-up that was still so near at hand. Wickliff even gave a little domestic dinner at The Minarets, consisting solely of the Winbushes and Mr. Trevor, and confident Trevor accepted the olive branch—so he put it—and came, and it was quite a pleasant evening. As far as Gondoline was concerned Wickliff's carriage was consistent with his resolve. He was as friendly as ever with the girl, never showed the faintest sign of resentment at her intimacy with his fair and florid rival, somewhat to her secret annoyance, was still, occasionally, her cheerful companion, and whenever he felt that he needed a little excitement, which was pretty often, he whizzed to town in his big car and diverted himself with civic adventures.

During all these pleasantly full and uneventful days Gregory Winbush never said a word to Wickliff about

his Purpose Achieved. If Wickliff had not remembered his friend's confession distinctly he might have thought that he had dreamed the amazing confidence. But if the inventor wished to be silent, if, perchance, he regretted his expansiveness, Wickliff was perfectly willing to be discreet, and never, by so much as a word or a hint, did he attempt to recall to Gregory the talk they had had about the great discovery.

It is possible that Wickliff was not altogether bursting with conviction as to that great discovery. There were inventors even in Buenos Ayres, and they all had this much in common, that they were all perfectly certain that they had made revolutionary discoveries. It was far from unlikely that Winbush was quite mistaken as to the importance of his work. To be candid, it was a matter of complete indifference to Wickliff—the first shock of surprise over and done with—whether Gregory had or had not done what he professed so jubilantly to have accomplished. Wickliff, if the phrase may be permitted, had one eye upon Gondoline and the other upon himself, and Wickliff's importance always loomed large in Wickliff's purview of the universe. He wanted Gondoline. It surprised and amused him to find how much he wanted her, but he allowed no sign of this to appear when he was in the girl's society. Gondoline was puzzled, Gondoline was irritated, which was just what Wickliff wanted. He was not ill-advised enough to air a studied indifference; he was careful to be natural and urbane, neither thrusting himself upon Gondoline, nor in the least degree appearing to avoid her. He felt convinced that with Gondoline this was the safest game to play. It never occurred to him that he would not finally win it, but meanwhile the game itself, with all its finesses, absorbed him.

However, one day when Wickliff had been lunching at Tennis-Court House Winbush suddenly and unexpectedly reverted to his Purpose. Gondoline had gone off to the tennis-club to play with young Trevor—it was a half-holiday—and Wickliff and his host were seated in the hall smoking and chatting about indifferent things. Talk flagged; there was a lapse. Sharply Winbush broke the silence.

"I have been thinking," he said solemnly, "over what you said the other day, and I have been wondering if there is really anything in it."

Wickliff was for a moment puzzled.

"In what?" he asked. "What did I say the other day?"

"Why, you know," Winbush replied, a little fretfully, "what you said about those people who were spying about and trying to find out the things that we were doing."

Wickliff remembered, realized that Winbush was putting back the hands of the clock to the date of their interrupted conversation. It reminded him vaguely of the story of the knight and the squire and the question of the cooking of eggs.

"I remember," he said, "telling you some things that so far as I know, are true."

"But surely," said Gregory, still a little querulously, "you do not seriously think that I, a humble worker in a modest London suburb, can possibly be under the observation of the emissaries of a foreign Power."

Wickliff thought he discerned a faint note of complacency in Mr. Winbush's voice, as if such imaginary attentions were not altogether without their element of flattery. He answered promptly:

"I assure you, Greg, that I meant every word that

I said. I only wish that we were as brisk and alert as some of our neighbours."

"Ah!" said Winbush, with the gratified air of one that had pinned an opponent in a difficulty. "I remember that you said that if there were somebody abroad who had been trying to do what I have done" ("He sticks to that," thought Wickliff), "we should all applaud some adventurous young Englishman who proved clever enough to get hold of the secret for our benefit."

"I said it, and I stick to it," Wickliff declared. "Don't you think that we should call him a clinking good citizen?"

"Dear friend," Winbush criticized resentfully, "I have been thinking the thing over and it seems to me to be a perfect mare's-nest. How on earth can you imagine any young Englishman getting the chance to find out the secret of my imaginary foreign colleague if my imaginary foreign colleague were working under the conditions of seclusion that I work under."

Wickliff, stimulated by the spirit of argument and primed by hazy recollections of shipboard conversations with Farnell, smiled at his friend's simplicity.

"That should not be difficult in theory," he asserted. "My imaginary investigator would have to play at not being English, of course, and that's where, in practice, my idea would probably not work. It is uncommonly hard for an Englishman to conceal his Englishness. In the first place he is always so proud of the fact, and in the second place he can never, or very seldom, learn to speak a foreign language so as to be mistaken for a native-born user of that language, confound him!"

Gregory ruminated for a few seconds.

"But according to your theory," he said, "if I am under observation, as you imagine me to be, there ought

to be some clever young foreigner masquerading round here as an Englishman to worm my secret out of me."

He paused for a moment to study the effect of this broadside upon Wickliff, and then added triumphantly: "Only there isn't."

Wickliff nodded in good-humoured recognition of his friend's score.

"I admit that weak point in my theory, but ever since you told me of your discovery I have been on the look-out for him, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised when he turns up."

He felt inwardly that he was talking through his hat, and that he had no strong conviction that his theory would be circumstantiated, but he felt bound to stand by his guns. A thought struck him.

"By the way," he asked, "didn't you have a Swiss man-servant once? I think I remember Gondoline saying something about him."

Winbush laughed outright.

"What! John!" he exclaimed. He always anglicized foreign names when he could. "No, no, my dear boy, you shall never persuade me that poor John was a mysterious emissary of an unscrupulous foreign Power."

"I know nothing about poor John," Wickliff answered, faintly nettled by his friend's derision. "He had left before I came back to England. It was only what we have been saying that brought his name to my mind."

"If you had known anything about him," Gregory said, jocosely exultant, "you would not talk such nonsense. John was the best servant I ever had. He came over to this country, it seems, to learn English, in order that he might be able to read the plays of Shakespeare in the original."

"That certainly was a very laudable ambition," Wickliff said dryly. It was an ambition he had never entertained. His bowing acquaintance with the Bard had ended when he left the Academy, where he had been forced reluctantly to plod his way through certain of the historical dramas.

"He was a wonder, I can tell you," Winbush went on, savouring recollection. "He came to me with a letter of recommendation from one of the teachers in our old school, and, by Jove! he deserved his credentials. There was nothing he couldn't turn his hand to. He even had a leaning towards science and wanted to be allowed to help me in my workshop, but, of course, I couldn't have that, you know."

"Hum," Wickliff said. "It's touching to find your humble dependent taking such an artless interest in your work."

"Oh, he was all right," Winbush maintained. "He thought I had a turning lathe in there, and he told me that he knew a little about wood-carving and the like, and would be delighted if his little talents could be of any service to me."

"I remember," Wickliff replied, "reading a fairy story once about a servant who was called 'Faithful John.' You seem to have found a second edition of the gentleman."

"He was a very good servant," Winbush said. "I didn't keep him on because there wasn't enough for him to do in the house, and I have to keep down all possible expenses. My experiments do eat up a lot of money."

"Did John seem sorry to go?" Wickliff questioned, still harping on his theme.

"Very sorry," Winbush answered curtly. He re-

sented the idea that he could possibly have been deceived in the matter.

"I wish I had seen John," Wickliff said slowly.

"No, no," Winbush insisted, with an air of great superiority, "you must look elsewhere for your spy gentleman."

He seemed to think that he had settled the matter once for all, but Wickliff was not to be dissuaded from his theory.

"You think I am laughing," he said, "but I assure you that I am serious enough, and I happen to know something of foreign enterprise." He was thinking as he spoke of his shipboard conversations with Farnell. "I tell you that if there was so much as a ghost of a hint going about that you had discovered, or even were trying to discover, anything connected with the problem of flight, something would be sure to happen which would show sooner or later that you were under some sort of surveillance."

"I really don't understand you," Mr. Winbush said rather snappishly. It was evident that the idea of being watched rather irritated him. "What is this something of yours that would be sure to happen?"

Now this was pressing Wickliff rather close, for though he was confident that he was right as to his conclusion, he had not been at the pains to formulate any special theory to justify it. But he recalled Farnell's talks and Farnell's theories and prepared to make an experiment in the art of speculation.

"Well," he said, "I should say that the first stage in my supposititious game of observation had already been played with the appearance on the scene of your faithful henchman John. By the way, what was his native language?"

"He came from one of the French cantons," Winbush said, with a roguish smile as much as to say, "I know what you are driving at, my friend, but it won't do." "He was Jean, not Johann."

"That's all right," said Wickliff, nothing disconcerted. "All the less likely to arouse suspicion."

"Pooh," said Mr. Winbush, "you have got hold of a mare's-nest, and are making a mountain out of it." Gregory's metaphor was confused, but his intention was plainly derisory. "Well, my Swiss servant has come, and my Swiss servant has gone. Surely the thing wouldn't stop there, would it? What would happen next?"

Wickliff reflected for a few moments. "No," he admitted; "naturally it wouldn't stop there. When the gentleman from the French canton had failed, as I presume he did fail, to discover what you were up to——"

"Of course he did," interjected Winbush peevishly, "that is, taking your ridiculous supposition for granted."

Wickliff took no notice of the interruption.

"I should next," he expounded, now thoroughly taken with his fantastic theory and greatly enjoying himself, "expect to find somebody turn up here who had nothing to do with any foreign country, nothing to do with airships of any form or kind, nothing to do with science of any sort. I should expect my gentleman to seem quite honest and commonplace and straightforward, to make no show of seeking any information, gaining any confidence, doing any pumping. My man should look and be as British as you please, not overdoing the assumption in the least, not suggesting in the slightest degree that there was any assumption. He should just appear to be a sound, honest, healthy, everyday Briton, with all the average, sound, honest, healthy, everyday

Briton's opinions, tastes and garments. He would be, in a word, the very last person you would ever dream of taking for a foreign spy. If I were in the place of the person or persons employing him, I think he should be a young man—oh, yes, young, and a jolly hearty fellow, the sort of chap, you know, who calls himself and who likes to be called a bit of a sportsman."

Wickliff had got thus far in his experiment in the methods of Farnell when he was interrupted by Winbush, who was leaning forward in his chair and staring at him with an expression of mingled amusement and disapproval.

"I say, old man," he protested, "don't you think you are overdoing it a bit?"

Wickliff, a little annoyed at being disturbed in his diversion, looked at the disturber reproachfully.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I am spinning a theory which seems to me to be very satisfactory."

"Of course," Winbush continued, "I can understand that you may not like the fellow—"

"What fellow?" cried Wickliff, with exasperation in his query. "I am elaborating a scheme—"

"But, really," Winbush went on, bearing down Wickliff's attempts to continue his exposition, "I do think that you are allowing yourself to carry prejudice to an extreme degree."

Wickliff was puzzled. "What the deuce are you talking about?" he asked.

"Come, come!" said Winbush, leaning back in his chair and looking very judicial, "do you want me to believe that in this picture of your penny-dreadful spy you were not having a slap at our young friend Charlie Trevor?"

Winbush's words thrilled Wickliff with the crispness

of an electric shock. He was not conscious at all of having the image of his rival in his mind when he was entertaining himself by painting his picture of the sort of emissary he would employ if he were trying to get at Gregory's secret. He leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily at the comic result of his speculations.

"By George!" he said, "you have hit it. My fictitious individual is a bit like our dear young friend."

"A bit like," growled Gregory; "why, dash it all, it's a perfect photograph! How annoyed the poor boy would be!"

"Yes, I don't suppose he would be pleased at the suggestion," Wickliff conceded; "but for all that, if I were wanting to have any spying done about here, young Trevor would be the very man I should like to be able to use for the purpose."

Gregory raised his hands with a gesture of comic despair. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "you are not going to let yourself take this absurd nonsense of yours seriously?"

"No, of course not," Wickliff answered hastily. He saw how it was. He had been thinking a great deal about Trevor of late, and when he began to draw the portrait of his imaginary spy he unwittingly allowed his personal feelings to guide his hand.

Gregory seemed to be satisfied by Wickliff's admission, but his satisfaction was not permitted to last long. Wickliff was not laughing any longer. He looked puzzled and he frowned. There was an aptness, the parallel which staggered him a little.

"It's funny that I should have seemed to pitch on Trevor," he said. "Now, just as a matter of curiosity, has he ever talked to you about airships, or anything connected with flight?"

"Never," Gregory answered sharply. He was vexed to find Wickliff still harping upon his absurd string.

But Wickliff was not to be baulked. The spirit of Farnell was upon him, and he persisted.

"Has he ever manifested any curiosity, however slight, as to the nature of your pursuits?" he asked.

"Of course he hasn't," Gregory responded pettishly. "He is much too well bred to be inquisitive."

"Yes, yes, yes," Wickliff agreed; "but then so would my imaginary man be, if he were not imaginary. What fun it would be if, after all, he were the very man I was guessing at."

"It wouldn't be fun at all," Winbush said sourly. "You go on as if life were like a story out of the 'Arabian Nights.'"

Wickliff rose from his chair and, standing over Gregory, clapped him on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow, life is very like a story out of the Arabian Nights,' I would say it was exactly like it if it were not so much more surprising and delightful."

Winbush shook his fist at his friend in pretended rage.

"Get out, you paradox-monger," he said. Wickliff caught at the epithet.

"Paradox-monger! I like that. How can you, a man of science and an inventor—in other words, a magician—how can you deny my case? Blasphemer of romance, the telephone gives you the lie, the phonograph gives you the lie, the bioscope, the mechanical piano, wireless telegraphy, motor-cars and taxi-cabs, all give you the lie and proclaim this an age of sorcery. Here are you, living in this placid suburb, trying to create a marvel far more amazing than the magic horse that we used to long for in childhood. Life is much more vivid than fiction, and

it is not for you, who deal daily and hourly in witchcraft, to deride me because I have hit upon something which ought to be the truth, even if it inconveniently proves not to be the truth."

CHAPTER XXII

A VISIT FROM MR. GORRINGTON

WICKLIFF paused at the end of his tirade to collect his breath, and Winbush was putting together a few ideas with which to reply to his friend's exuberant fancy. His intention was interrupted by the entry of the maid with a visiting-card upon a salver. She proffered the salver to Winbush, and Winbush picked the card gingerly from its surface, read it, and attempted a somewhat ineffectual whistle.

"Well, this is funny," he said. "Just listen, Wickliff."

He read aloud the name engraved upon the card:

"MR. SIMPSON P. GORRINGTON,
"Representative of the
"PAN-EUROPEAN AERIAL NAVIGATION SYNDICATE.

"What do you think of that?"

Wickliff shouted for joy. "Hurrah for the 'Arabian Nights,'" he thundered. "Have the fellow in."

Winbush addressed the maid. "Show the gentleman in." The maid vanished.

Wickliff rubbed his hands and gloated. "Well, what do you say now?" he questioned.

"How can I say anything," Gregory answered plaintively, "until I know what the fellow wants?"

"Oh, I guess I know what he wants, right enough," Wickliff said sagaciously.

A moment later Mr. Gorrington was ushered into the room.

Mr. Simpson P. Gorrington suggested in his appearance, at the first glance, a distinguished diplomatist. He was tall and thin and clean-shaven, of a dusty complexion, with smooth dust-coloured hair, and eyes, that also appeared to be dust-coloured, which surveyed the world through a gold-rimmed pince-nez with a "you-can't-possibly - deceive - me - and - therefore - why - attempt - to - do - so" expression that was sometimes disconcerting. He was carefully dressed, perhaps even a shade over-dressed for his pose of distinguished diplomatist. The dark grey morning-coat, the white waistcoat, the grey trousers, the delicate grey tie—all combined to make up a whole, which seemed, as it were, a little too ostentatiously ambassadorial for a man who was not an ambassador. It was plain that Mr. Simpson P. Gorrington pictured to himself the ideal ambassador as always arrayed in a suave and harmonious adjustment of greys and whites, and was, in a sense, the slave of his own ideal.

He was consistent to his ideal in his carriage as in his habiliments. He talked, and his voice seemed to ring with international decision. He listened, and seemed to be weighing in his silence the conflicting counsels of a congress. He moved his hand as if he were signing innumerable protocols and banishing sheaves of completed treaties to the archives of august chancelleries. There is many an ambitious politician who would have envied Mr. Gorrington his appearance. He readily explained to friends and acquaintances that the "P" in his array of names stood for "Philadelphus," a fact which did not appear to him to be at all amusing. He professed to hail from the capital of Pennsylvania.

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Wickliff, eyeing him with restrained enjoyment, decided that if you could not call Mr. Gorrington's manner absolutely ingratiating, you might at least admit that it was definitely insinuating, and deliberately imposing. No statesman about to address an audience of illustrious colleagues could have done so with an ampler blend of condescension and dignity than that employed by Mr. Gorrington as he now prepared to unfold his mission.

He looked from one occupant of the room to the other with an air of polite hesitation.

"Mr. Winbush?" he said, punctuating the vague of uncertainty with interrogation.

Winbush made a funny little bird-like inclination of his head towards the stranger which he intended for a bow.

"I am Mr. Winbush," he said.

Mr. Gorrington drew a breath of satisfaction. Perhaps he preferred that Winbush, and not his companion, should be the inventor with whom he had come to deal.

"May I be accorded the favour of a few minutes' private conversation with you, Mr. Winbush?" he asked.

Mr. Winbush nodded like a robin. "By all means," he chirped.

Mr. Gorrington glanced at Wickliff. It was a glance of extreme urbanity, but it managed to carry with it a subtle suggestion of desire for Wickliff's absence.

"My business is private," he said smoothly.

Wickliff went over to Winbush and put a hand on his shoulder. "Shall I go, old man?" he asked cheerfully and loudly. In a whisper he added: "Better not."

Winbush took the hint. "I have no private business from my friend," he said to his visitor, and turning to Wickliff, he added: "Please stay, Wickliff."

Wickliff accepted the invitation with alacrity, and seated himself comfortably in an arm-chair with his back to the window, from which he was able comfortably to study the countenance of the stranger.

The stranger gave a faint shrug of his shoulders, that implied the yielding of a technical point.

"As you please," he said, in a tone that was half protest and half acquiescence. In obedience to a hospitable gesture from Winbush he seated himself, and Gregory followed his example. Wickliff, from his position of advantage, renewed his pipe.

Mr. Gorrington paused for a few seconds before he spoke. When he did so, it was with such an imposing manner as would have become a president of a Peace Conference on the first meeting of its members.

"As my card will have already informed you, I represent the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate."

Mr. Winbush leaned forward, pressed his open palms upon his knees, and looked more like an inquiring robin than before.

"What is the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate?" he questioned.

Mr. Gorrington nodded his head approvingly.

"Good," he observed, in the manner of one who applauds some felicitous political suggestion. "You are right to ask, if you have not heard of us, though I am a little surprised that you, of all men, should not have done so."

There was a faint hint of wounded pride in Mr. Gorrington's voice, which amused the listening Wickliff, but which was wholly lost upon Winbush.

"Why I of all men?" he asked, with a blankly innocent expression, which Wickliff much admired.

Mr. Gorrington hastened to explain.

"Because we have certainly heard of you," he said, and he said it as if, while speaking the words, he had on the instant pinned the ribbon of some magnificent order on Mr. Winbush's shabby coat.

Gregory's air of blank innocence shifted to one of even blander surprise.

"Indeed," he said dryly.

"Indeed," Mr. Gorrington affirmed emphatically. "It is only natural that we should. I have the honour to represent, Mr. Winbush, a syndicate that is started in the interest of no particular country, of no particular individuals, but of humanity in general."

He said his say with an unction of splendid benevolence. Wickliff, from his corner, murmured approvingly: "How refreshing!" Mr. Gorrington caught the sound, but not the sense. He turned with something of sharpness in Wickliff's direction.

"I beg your pardon," was what he said: what he seemed to say was: "Why do you presume to intrude upon the conversation?"

Wickliff made him a gesture of apology.

"Excuse me if I interrupted the flow of your discourse," he said, in a manner insidiously modelled upon that of Mr. Gorrington; "but I was so captivated, so carried away by the enthusiasm which your words aroused, that I really could not help voicing my approval. What I said was, 'How refreshing!'"

Mr. Gorrington scrutinized Wickliff through the gold-rimmed pince-nez somewhat suspiciously, but Wickliff's countenance was expressive of nothing more than an honest admiration.

Mr. Gorrington at once rewarded and chastened his zeal with a precise inclination of the head.

"I am glad," he said, "to accept any expression of

approval of those principles which have always animated the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, which always will continue to animate it, and which, in a word, have made it what it is."

Wickliff murmured "Beautiful!" beneath his breath, and Mr. Gorrington, thinking that he had put him in his place and done with him for good and all—in which he was mistaken—again turned his gaze in the direction of his listening host.

"Our aim, Mr. Winbush," he began, removing his glasses and gesticulating with them as if they formed an implement by whose aid he could drive his arguments more forcibly home—"in short, is to discover and to encourage all those independent pioneers on the trackless pathway of the air, who, through circumstances over which they have no control, do not always command the means necessary to enable them to foster the creations of their genius to the best possible advantage."

After this magnificent preliminary, Mr. Gorrington, who in making it had been sitting bolt upright, now leaned back in his chair, and regarded Winbush with a magnanimous smile, as one who should say: "Admire me, for I am admirable!"

Gregory rubbed his hands together nervously and looked dubious.

"Very kind, I am sure," he murmured almost inaudibly. He did not know what to say, and was therefore wise enough to say nothing.

Mr. Gorrington waved a protective eyeglass in his direction. "Not at all," he declared pompously, "not at all." He readjusted his glasses on his nose and beamed through them upon the perturbed Winbush.

"The State," he continued solemnly, "does not come to the aid of those pioneers of whom I speak—and when

I use the expression ‘the State,’ I have not in my mind one State in particular, but any State in general—for the very good reason that the State is, in nine cases out of ten, unaware of their ambitions, and, in consequence, ignorant of their ambitions.”

The long sentence, stabbed by parenthesis, flowed from his lips as fluently as the tape from a machine. It conveyed to Wickliff the impression that it had often been uttered before, and that its facility was as mechanical as the action of the tape. Though he came to this conclusion quickly, by the time that he had done so Mr. Gorrington was flowing again.

“Where the State,” he was saying, “fails to act, from the lack of the necessary apparatus for discovering patient genius modestly concealed, there the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate steps in. We have the apparatus to discover hidden genius, and we do discover it. Now it has come to our knowledge that you are interested in aerostatics, that you have been so interested for some considerable time; that you have, in fact, to come to the point at once with that brevity which is the best instrument of the business man, been at work for some years upon a flying machine.”

He paused, majestically impressive, and Winbush, now showing signs of serious interest, cocked his head on one side and questioned: “May I ask what has given you that impression?”

Mr. Gorrington shook his head with a kind of sinister playfulness.

“Ah, ha!” he corrected jocosely, “I did not speak of our impression, I spoke of our knowledge.”

Winbush repeated his question in another form:

“What makes you think that I am interested in aerostatics?”

Mr. Gorrington extended his arms as if he were wooing the whole habitable globe to his embrace.

"My dear sir," he answered, "the voice of science. The eyes of science are so keen, the ears of science are so alert nowadays, that she allows nothing that any of her votaries may do to escape her. And what the eyes of science and the ears of science learn, that the voice of science conveys with electrical swiftness to the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate."

Gregory, still rubbing his hands together, looked thoughtful. "Indeed!" was, however, all that he permitted himself to reply to the illuminating eloquence of Mr. Gorrington, who seemed to the attentive Wickliff to be perhaps a shade disappointed at not making a more decided effect upon his hearer.

He again leaned forward, his voice pitched in its most persuasive accent, his face irradiating persuasion.

"That is so," he affirmed. "Your contributions to the scientific press have not escaped our notice, Mr. Winbush, and we recognized at once that they were charged and surcharged, if I may be allowed to say so, with the authority of a master."

Wickliff could not refrain from sending an "I-told-you-so" look in the direction of his friend; but Gregory's face was carefully averted. Mr. Gorrington may or may not have noticed the look. He continued his harangue:

"Now we, the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, come to you very frankly, with open arms"—he extended his own again as he spoke—"with open hearts"—he tapped himself on the left breast—"with open minds." He drew his right hand slowly across his forehead. "We say to you, candidly and cordially, that we are interested in your scheme, that we want to be still more interested in it, and that we want you to be inter-

ested in us. We do not ask you to submit your plans to us before we consider terms. We have so much confidence in your scientific ability, that we propose to negotiate for your invention at once."

Had Mr. Gorrington then and there conferred a patent of nobility upon Mr. Winbush, his manner could not have been more regally condescending. He plainly expected Winbush to be dazzled by his generosity, but Winbush did not appear to be at all dazzled. He only scratched an ear thoughtfully, and peeped at Mr. Gorrington with a look of bird-like cunning.

"Supposing," he said slowly, "that I were to admit, for the sake of argument, that I was engaged upon some work of the kind you mentioned——"

Mr. Gorrington interrupted him, waving his hand as if to brush a paltry subterfuge aside.

"My dear sir," he protested shrilly, "is there any possible need for artifice and evasion between us? You know what you have been doing, and we know, broadly speaking, what you have been doing. Let us therefore deal frankly with each other, as men should who labour together in that glorious common cause—the welfare of humanity."

Even this glowing appeal did not have much effect in thawing the cautiousness of Gregory's manner. Wickliff, sitting very still, with immobile face, was much diverted by the wariness of his old friend. "Greg can hold his own," he reflected approvingly.

"Suppose," Winbush said deliberately and heavily, as if the question weighed upon him, "for the moment that I admitted your assumption that I have an invention to dispose of, and that I were, in consequence of that admission, willing to take your offer into consideration, may I ask to what government you would propose to sell it?"

Mr. Gorrington's atmosphere of gracious condescension shifted swiftly into one of frank man-of-the-world confidence. He stretched his hands expansively. Wickliff, still studying him attentively, thought that the words "howling bounder" fitted him to a nicety.

"Why, my dear sir," Gorrington announced pontifically, "we of the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate are, I hope, impassioned humanitarians; but, as I also hope, we are not degenerate sentimentalists. In the interests, not of ourselves, but of humanity at large, we are, first and foremost, men of business. We should naturally sell to the highest bidder."

Mr. Winbush tickled viciously at the ear which he had hitherto neglected.

"It seems to me," he said, with a look of great knowingness, "that I could do that as well as you."

Mr. Gorrington shook his head emphatically, and there was a profundity of pitying denial in his action.

"There you make a profound mistake, my dear sir," he assured with eager emphasis. "We are"—and as he spoke he tapped himself sharply upon the chest, as if he were a very brisk and persistent woodpecker—"in touch with all the official worlds in Europe. We can command, if you will allow me to say so, an immediate attention in the most exclusive chancelleries, which even your own admitted and recognized great talent might fail, for lack of the proper support, to gain. What we desire is, to spare you a world of unnecessary trouble, to relieve you of all responsibility, and, at the same time, amply and properly to compensate you for the arduous services which you have rendered to the spirit of science and the genius of humanity."

He halted for a moment, coughed slightly, brought

the tips of his fingers together, surveyed Winbush over their arch and went on.

"Now what we, the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, propose is to make you a substantial monetary offer, partly in cash down and partly in shares in our great enterprise, for the entire control of your invention, which, as I already repeat, we are taking mainly on trust and on the faith of your recognized merit. In this way, as you must clearly see, you would reap, as you deserve to reap, a twofold reward for your labours."

Gregory flung a hurried glance in the direction of Wickliff, but Wickliff's face was quite impassive, and Wickliff's gaze was steadily fixed upon the plausible countenance of Mr. Gorrington. Gregory stroked his chin affectionately, having exhausted the possibilities of his ears.

"And the sum you offer," he said tentatively, after what seemed a long pause to Mr. Gorrington, to judge by the growth of the disapproving surprise on his features, "what might that happen to be?"

Mr. Gorrington answered him promptly, as if the command of opulence and the bestowal of reward upon merit were an everyday affair with him.

"Five thousand pounds," he said roundly, rolling the thousands lusciously on his tongue. "Two thousand five hundred down, and two thousand five hundred in shares at par in the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, preference shares."

He surveyed Mr. Winbush, looking very small and insignificant, but also, at least to Wickliff, looking very dogged and determined, with a look that was intended to overawe. It seemed to challenge the possibility of a refusal to so magnificent an offer. Yet the refusal came,

as unexpected and as decisive as lightning on a fine day.

"I am afraid," Gregory said, gently oscillating his head in negation, "that I cannot entertain your offer."

The horrified astonishment that convulsed Mr. Gorrington's countenance was so alarming to witness that Winbush hastened to explain.

"You see," he said mildly, "I did not go into this to make money. I have already spent upon my experiments"—he dropped now definitely any pretence as to the nature of his work—"a sum many times larger than the sum you offer."

Mr. Gorrington strained forward, exuding readiness to meet the speaker more than half way.

"If it is merely a question of terms—" he began, but Winbush waved him down with a sudden emphasis that delighted Wickliff and perplexed Mr. Gorrington.

"It is not merely a question of terms," he continued. "I am not a speculator. I am an inventor. Also, I am an Englishman. I did my work in the first place to please myself; but when it is done, I hope that it may be of service to my own country. If my own country would not buy it from me, I would rather give it to my own country than sell it to any other."

Wickliff could have gone over to Gregory and hugged him for his words. The funny little fussy man was true grit anyway. As for Mr. Gorrington, the effect upon him was plainly staggering. He glanced up at the ceiling as if he were appealing to a heaven that must be vexed by such a flight in the face of Providence. Then he brought his gaze down again to Mr. Winbush, very pink and prickly, with a look of reproachful admonition.

"Now that," he asserted, with the sadness of one that

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is always eager to do good, and always being thwarted in his endeavour, "that is what I am regretfully compelled to call being degenerately sentimental."

Winbush gave a dry little cough behind his hand, and the dry determination of his manner remained unaltered.

"Call it what you please," he said mildly, decisively. "There it is and there it stays."

Mr. Gorrington extended his hand towards the refractory inventor as if he were making the first few passes in a desperate attempt to mesmerize him and mould him to his will.

"I do not wish," he assured, "to appear unnecessarily pertinacious, but I must press you—I really must press you to consider the matter a little more seriously."

He would have said more, but Winbush interrupted him. Winbush rose to his feet, and the action conveyed plainly, as it was intended to convey, that the interview was at an end.

"Quite useless, Mr. Gorrington," he said decisively. "My mind is quite made up. Let me wish you a good day."

When his host had risen, it was plainly Mr. Gorrington's duty to follow his example; but Mr. Gorrington, ignoring conventionalities, retained his seat. It seemed to Wickliff that for a moment a peculiarly unpleasant expression disturbed the blandness of his countenance, an expression uncomfortably malign, that seemed more natural to the face it altered than the former elaborate suavity. Mr. Gorrington was evidently not a man to be easily dislodged.

"In your interest, Mr. Winbush," he went on, in a voice that did not sound nearly so amiable as before, "I must continue to press you with all the means in my power."

Gregory, plainly astonished by the definite if faint change in Mr. Gorrington's manner, sat down again and stared at the speaker in surprise. Wickliff took an attitude a shade more comfortable than the one he had hitherto adopted, and allowed himself to smile broadly. Mr. Gorrington seemed to be pleased with the effect he had produced.

"Now, Mr. Winbush," he said, with an acidity as of vinegar blending with the oily flow of his discourse, "we make it our duty to know a good deal about those with whom we may wish to transact business, and, in consequence, we have been at the pains to learn a good deal about you. We are aware, for instance, that you happen to owe a good deal of money."

Wickliff pricked up his ears. "Now," he thought, "we are coming to cues." Mr. Winbush's pink face grew pinker, and he drew his small figure as stiffly up as he could.

"My private affairs," he said sharply, "are no concern of yours."

Gorrington shook a long forefinger at him with an air of playful reproof.

"Forgive me," he retorted, "that is where you are in error. In the cause of science, for the welfare of humanity, we recognize no private affairs, not even yours, my good sir. Besides, as it happens, it rests with us to settle whether they are any longer your private affairs."

This amazing assertion seemed to stagger Mr. Winbush considerably, though it had no effect upon the imperturbability of Wickliff. Mr. Winbush leaned back in his chair, as if Gorrington's extended forefinger had suddenly elongated and thrust him down.

"Indeed," he gasped. He was conscious that he was

being threatened in some way, but he did not understand the nature of the threat.

Mr. Gorrington continued with an air of ill-concealed triumph.

"It has come within the scope of our knowledge that you are indebted to your purveyors of electric and other scientific appliances, Messrs. Baumberg & Baumberg, to the amount of some two thousand and odd pounds. That indebtedness can be taken over at any moment by our syndicate, and you would in that case become our creditor, Mr. Winbush. Now if we choose to press for the money?"

Mr. Winbush raised his pale eyebrows in inquiry.
"This is a threat?" he questioned.

Mr. Gorrington made a deprecating gesture.

"Let us avoid the use of unpleasant terms," he requested. "They always have a tendency to complicate matters that have no need for complication. Let us rather say that I have made a friendly suggestion."

He stopped speaking for a moment, watching, with a decently veiled amusement, the visible perturbation on the face of the man whom he believed to be his victim.

"By what right," Winbush asked angrily, "do you venture to assume that I am not in a position to meet any liabilities I may have incurred?"

"By the right of knowledge, my dear sir," Gorrington answered triumphantly. "We are well aware that at the present moment your balance at your bank is under five hundred pounds—I can give you the precise figures in pounds, shillings and pence if you wish—and that would not go far to settle Messrs. Baumberg's claim."

"But why should Messrs. Baumberg—" Gregory began, in a tone of puzzled distress, but Mr. Gorrington nimbly interrupted him.

"Baumberg & Baumberg," he asserted, "are like most ordinary sensible business men, and would like to see the colour of their money. If they were to know that you were not in a position to pay them that money—"

"I do not believe that Baumberg & Baumberg would press me like that," Winbush interrupted in his turn.

Gorrington smiled.

"Think so?" he said. "It is plain, Mr. Winbush, that you are not a practical business man. Why should you be? But Baumberg & Baumberg are practical, and if they found that they could not get their money from you and that they could get their money from us, I take it for granted that they would be willing to transfer their claim to us."

Mr. Winbush seemed staggered by Gorrington's threat. Although his modest fortune had come to him from a business source, he, himself, knew little of business of any kind. He had parted with the Emporium the moment that it came into his hands, and ever since he had lived his isolated scientific life as heedless of financial affairs as a bird in a tree. He was too ignorant of law to know whether what Mr. Gorrington proposed was, or was not, a customary legal process. What he did realize very clearly was that it would be a very serious thing indeed for him to be called upon to pay out two thousand pounds at that moment. He regarded Mr. Gorrington resentfully, but he said nothing, for he was totally at a loss what to say.

"Now," Mr. Gorrington said, enjoying the perturbation of his host, "if we were to act, as I hope we shall not be compelled to act, in the manner which I have just indicated, I think you will scarcely be able to deny that the immediate result might be, to put it mildly, somewhat awkward for you."

Mr. Winbush knew with disagreeable certainty that it would be very awkward for him indeed, though he was exceedingly unwilling to admit the fact. But the admission betrayed itself in the nervous working of his face. He had, he was well aware, allowed his account with Baumberg & Baumberg to run up, and Baumberg & Baumberg had allowed it to run on, and had never asked for their money for a long time back, and the things he bought from them were costly things that needed frequent renewal. He was still at a loss what to say ; though he felt that he ought to say something. But before he could find words to clothe his mingled emotions, he was interrupted by Wickliff, who suddenly jerked himself to his feet and addressed Gorrington cheerfully.

"Not at all, my dear," he said, "not at all. How fortunate that I was privileged to be present at this pleasant and instructive little meeting."

He crossed the floor to where his friend was sitting, huddled up and looking helpless, and clapped him on the shoulder with ostentatious geniality.

"My dear Gregory," he said, "I happen to have a few thousands lying idle in my bank, of which I have no immediate need. I shall be delighted to let you have the use of them if this good gentleman"—he turned as he spoke, and smiled ironically at Gorrington—"finds that his friends are in a hurry for their money."

Winbush gave his friend a glance of canine gratitude. Mr. Gorrington looked for a moment very wolfishly hostile. But it was only for a moment. Then he was as equable, as plausible as before.

"Mr. Winbush," he argued, "must not allow himself to take offence if, in our anxiety to make him take a reasonable course, we ventured to suggest a little gentle pressure. Men of genius are often like children in busi-

ness affairs, and we, who are business men, must occasionally constitute ourselves their nurses. I am sure you will agree with me, Mr. ——” He paused. “I have not the pleasure of knowing your name.”

Wickliff enlightened him. “My name is Hersham, Wickliff Hersham. I am afraid that I cannot agree with you in approving of your methods of doing business. If you believe in my friend’s invention, as you evidently do when you resort to a kind of blackmail in order to obtain it, so do I to the tune of good money. I think there is nothing more to be said. We wish you good-day, Mr. Gorrington.”

Wickliff’s attitude and manner were so entirely positive and uncompromising that Gorrington seemed to recognize that his mission was a failure. He was not going to yield his ground, however, without making a further effort. As he rose to his feet he again addressed himself to Winbush, who, thanks to Wickliff’s timely aid, had now recovered his equanimity.

“Suppose my Syndicate was willing to raise its price?” he asked. “Suppose we were willing to cancel that little matter with Baumberg & Baumberg?”

Wickliff came between him and Winbush, who was quite content to leave the handling of the matter to his friend.

“We wish you good-day, Mr. Gorrington,” he said again, even more decisively than before.

Mr. Gorrington shrugged his shoulders, looked from one to the other of the two men facing him, realized that there was nothing better for him to do than to go. Mr. Gorrington went.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT WOULD NOT BE FAIR TO GONDOLINE

THE visit of Mr. Gorrington amused Wickliff as much as it amazed and irritated Gregory. There are few things that a man likes better than to be confirmed in some unlikely judgment that he has delivered, and it was highly gratifying to Wickliff that his experiment in the methods of Mr. Farnell had been so curiously justified.

Winbush, on the other hand, found it difficult, even with the memory of the pseudo-diplomatic Gorrington still warm in the room, to admit that Wickliff's non-sensical deductions and predictions could possibly be true and that occult potencies could really be at the pains to interest themselves in his experiments and inventions.

Wickliff snapped his fingers joyously and gave vent to a kind of crow of delight.

"Checkmate to the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate," he chuckled gleefully.

Winbush reached out his hand, caught his friend's hand and grasped it warmly.

"My dear fellow," he said, almost tearfully. "How can I thank you?"

Wickliff stared at Gregory.

"Thank me? What for?" he asked, with genuine surprise.

Gregory wrung his hand again.

"Why, for lending me this money," he said softly.

Wickliff released his hand and laughed loudly.

"There is no occasion to thank me," he said briskly.
"I am not going to lend it to you."

The pink, elated face of Winbush lost for a moment something of its pink, and all its elation. He gaped at his friend with a disconcerted expression.

"Oh, I thought you said——" he mumbled.

Wickliff promptly interrupted him. He stood in front of his companion with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and a humorous smile on his features.

"Of course I said so," he admitted gaily, "but that was only to bluff that ruffian. I daresay I have more than a couple of thousand lying loose; but I don't mean to lend them to you, unless it is absolutely unavoidable, as I have a better use for them, which I will explain to you later. But the good Gorrington does not know that, and he takes me at my word, as you did."

Winbush looked like a very dejected bird indeed as he listened to Wickliff's explanation.

"I see," he murmured weakly.

Wickliff went on, unheeding him.

"Which shows that sometimes your knave is as gullible as your fool."

The moment he had uttered these words it occurred to him that the phrase was not altogether felicitous and he hastened to amend it.

"I beg your pardon, old man. Of course, you understand that I am speaking symbolically."

Winbush blinked. "I understand that," he agreed. He seemed to be pleased to be able to assert that he understood anything in the astonishing events of that astonishing morning.

Wickliff continued his harangue:

"It is highly probable that you will not be bothered

about that little account ; but we can go into all that later. Our little adventure of to-day teaches us, my dear Greg, that we must have no more shilly-shallying."

He laid a strong hand upon Winbush's shoulder and swayed him gently to and fro as he lectured him.

" We must, as the poet pithily says, act in the living present."

Winbush, visibly flustered by his friend's observations and by the swaying motion imparted to his anatomy, could think of nothing better to say than " Must we ? "

" We must," Wickliff repeated emphatically. " We must approach those bottle-nosed sharks at the War Office. I beg the shark's pardon. He is quite an intelligent creature. We can prod them into something like activity with Gorrington's offer."

Here Wickliff was interrupted in his turn by Winbush.

" I would never take Gorrington's offer," he asserted hotly.

Wickliff released Winbush, who seemed to regain his equilibrium gladly and smiled approval of his heat.

" Of course not," he conceded ; " but there is no use telling the chaps at the War Office that. They will value your invention the more highly if they think that any foreign Power wants to put her claws into it. The War Office mayn't know much, but it does know that a foreign Power doesn't chuck its money away for nothing."

" Why do you say a foreign Power ? " Winbush asked.

" Because I mean a foreign Power," Wickliff answered. " It is highly probable, to my mind, that the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate is merely a sham, a mask for bigger things."

Winbush gaped again.

"What makes you think that?" he asked. He was feeling a little dizzy; his head seemed to swim; he was unused to excitements.

"Because it's part of the theory I started with," Wickliff replied. "Mr. Simpson P. Gorrington may, or may not, be the American citizen he evidently wishes us to believe him to be, but I feel pretty sure that his precious Syndicate is a bogus show. Mind you, Greg, I haven't a word of fault to find with Gorrington or with those bigger nobs who set him and his kind in motion for trying to find out your secret. That's all simple and straightforward enough. You have invented something of incalculable value to any nation that gets hold of it. Small blame, therefore, to any nation for trying to get hold of it, by any means in their power."

"By any lawful means," Winbush corrected austerely. Wickliff laughed denial.

"By any means in their power, lawful or unlawful. Our friend Gorrington was an example of the more or less lawful methods. If you had been willing to sell it is possible that he would have been able to produce the money or reasonable assurance of the worth of your invention. But if I am not mistaken in my prognostications we shall be made aware, sooner or later, of the employment of unlawful methods, as you call them. I don't, and I should use them myself if I were on the job."

Mr. Winbush did not seem to be paying much attention to his friend's words. He appeared to be thinking of something else.

"What annoys me," he complained, "is to think that, in spite of all my care, some hint of what I was about should have oozed out in this way."

"My dear fellow," Wickliff replied, "it may be annoying, but it certainly is not surprising. If you will write letters on aviation to scientific journals, if you will employ foreign servants, if you will get your appliances from Baumberg & Baumberg, what can you expect?"

"What is the matter with Baumberg & Baumberg?" Winbush asked tartly. "What do you know about them?"

"Nothing whatever," Wickliff answered frankly; "but I imagine a good deal, apart from the fact of their foreign name and their willingness to be made the instruments of Gorrington's scheme. What sort of stuff are you in the habit of getting from them?"

"Oh, almost everything," Gregory answered. "They are big manufacturers of everything connected with scientific electricity, and from time to time they have made things for me according to my directions and sketches."

"There you are," Wickliff exclaimed, with an air of triumphant conviction that irritated Winbush.

"Nothing of the kind," he said with some acerbity. "You don't suppose that I was such an idiot as to entrust them with any complete piece of work. I only gave them a bit here and a bit there, from which they could learn nothing."

"Very possibly not," Wickliff answered composedly; "but they might guess a devil of a lot, don't you see. They certainly might, and they probably would know, what your special game was. They probably, if they are out to pick up things and are in with people like Gorrington and his Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, keep a sharp eye on the scientific journals and mark any new name that turns up. Judging by the

kind of things you ordered from them, they might very well put two and two together and make a shrewd guess at the line along which you were working. Then, if they thought it worth while, they would try, or others would try for them, to nobble you. And they apparently have thought it worth while from what we have seen to-day."

Mr. Winbush acquiesced gloomily. He was greatly depressed to find that the darkness in which his secret had been muffled, as in the shades of deepest night, was not, after all, of so inky a blackness as he had fondly believed it to be.

"There is one thing I am confident of," he said, hopefully seeking to cheer himself up, "and that is, that my secret is safe."

"So far," Wickliff commented dryly. "It is pretty plain that the world, or at least, a part of the world, knows that there is a secret, and my idea is that we had better look out for squalls."

"What do you mean by looking out for squalls?" Winbush queried testily.

"I mean, let us keep a bright look-out for any possibility of danger, even from the most unexpected quarter?"

"You are not going back to that nonsense about Charlie Trevor again, are you?" Winbush grumbled.

"I'm not so sure that it is nonsense," Wickliff answered, meeting Gregory's fractiousness with patient good-humour. "I'll keep an eye on the young gentleman, and if there is anything to find out you may bet your boots I'll find it. In the meantime we'd better get going with the War Office right away, and you'd better keep your invention tightly shut up."

"Of course I do," Gregory protested. "You don't suppose I leave it lying about all over the shop."

"Is the whole thing committed to paper now?"

Winbush nodded.

"So that if anyone had your plans he could create your Stabilizer."

"Not anyone," Gregory corrected. "Only someone who thoroughly understood the subject."

"Of course, I meant that. And where do your plans live?"

Winbush pointed to the door that conducted to the work-room.

"In my desk yonder."

"Where anyone could get at them?"

Winbush shook his head impatiently.

"People can't get into my work-room; and nobody knows that the plans are there."

"That remains to be seen," said Wickliff. "Would you have any objection to letting me see the place presently?"

Gregory gave a little sigh of significant surrender to his vehement ally.

"Not in the least," he assented dolefully. "You seem to be able to settle everything."

Wickliff clapped him cheerfully on the back and the little man winced under the heartiness of the salutation.

"I can, dear man, and you ought to thank Heaven that I am here to do it for you. That is the worst of you geniuses, you are just magnificent in your laboratories and studies and workshops, but when you get into the rough-and-tumble of practical life, well, you are generally a bit out of it, if I may say so."

Gregory could not, and did not, contest his friend's

conclusion. He had never at any time of his life regarded himself as a man of the world; the whole course of his later life had been to take him away from the world, keeping him sheltered, secluded, and, apart from his own work, inefficient. He would have been very considerably at a loss to know how to carry himself in this sudden and odd emergency, and what steps it were best to take to baffle further investigations. So he was very glad indeed to have the experienced, self-reliant, cocksure Wickliff by his side.

While Mr. Winbush was thus reflecting in a somewhat melancholy mood, Wickliff, who appeared to be in the highest spirits, was blithely whistling some bars of a Coon song. Presently he stopped, and, looking steadfastly at Gregory, he spoke unexpectedly: "Now as to that chief reason I had for not being anxious to lend you that money."

"Yes," Gregory observed. "You said there was another reason, I remember."

"It would not be fair to Gondoline," Wickliff said gravely.

Winbush was utterly puzzled, and he looked it, as he repeated slowly Wickliff's words. "It would not be fair to Gondoline."

"Grossly unfair," Wickliff affirmed emphatically.

Winbush stared at him in unconcealed amazement.

"I am afraid I don't understand," he said plaintively. "Do you mean that you intend to leave your money to Gondoline?"

"That is as it may be," Wickliff answered composedly. "I mean to marry Gondoline."

Winbush passed a tremulous hand across his high, pink forehead. "I do not," he confessed, "seem to understand things very clearly this morning."

"It requires no superhuman effort to understand what I have just said," Wickliff answered quietly. "I mean to marry Gondoline."

Winbush apparently could only gasp; articulate speech, either of approval or disapproval, seemed to be denied him. Wickliff went calmly on.

"Yes. You seem surprised. Why? Gondoline is very like her mother. We were both in love with Gondoline's mother. You won, and I went out into the wilderness. Now I have come back to find that a new Gondoline, as lovely as the old, is in existence. You took Gondoline number one away from me. You cannot object to my wish to marry Gondoline number two."

Winbush, much agitated and bewildered, swayed from one foot to another with an air of great perturbation.

"It is not for me to decide," he declared limply. "What does the girl say?"

Wickliff grinned. "Oh, the girl says 'No,' right enough," he admitted as cheerfully as if the fact were not of the least importance to his hopes.

Winbush made an appealing, almost a despairing gesture. "Well, then—" he began, broke off, and could say no more, wallowing in perplexity.

Wickliff's grin widened. Winbush's astonishment diverted him.

"My dear Gregory," he said, "when a girl says 'No,' it does not always follow that she means 'No'; or even if she means it to-day, that she will mean it to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow. She would not have said 'No,' or meant 'No,' I think, if I had asked her yesterday."

Gregory rubbed his forehead pathetically. The day was proving rather too much for him. It really contained too many surprises.

"I am afraid I do not quite follow," he protested feebly; but Wickliff promptly cut him short.

"I speak figuratively," he said. "By yesterday, I mean the time a month ago, when Gondoline and I were very good friends. The time before I was ass enough to go away to Paris. The time before a certain young gentleman made his, to me, very distasteful appearance, and put my nose out of joint. Do you know that it is a most painful process."

Gregory fondled his own nose thoughtfully, as if he were trying to realize the anatomical accuracy of the statement.

"I suppose so," he murmured.

Wickliff went on briskly.

"But time and chance are hefty bone-setters, and with any luck the injured organ will soon be itself again. I shall not take 'No' for an answer when there is a girl like Gondoline to win and a bounding outsider for my rival."

Winbush looked at his old friend with a pathetic expression. "Excuse me," he said diffidently, "if I say, if I suggest, if I venture to hint that there is a perhaps certain disparity of years which—"

He stopped as if he found it embarrassing to continue, but Wickliff was not in the least embarrassed.

"Lord bless you, no!" he replied cheerfully. "Not a bit of it. We reached twenty-five, you and I, more than twenty odd years ago, when you married Gondoline number one. I read somewhere once that some clever fellow has said that with the best will in the world one cannot be five-and-twenty for ever. I mean to give that clever fellow, whoever he was, the lie, and to be five-and-twenty, or as good an imitation of it as I can muster, to the end of the course."

Gregory nodded in half-hearted approval of his old friend's heroic attitude.

"Of course," he admitted, "you are very healthy and well-preserved, and all that."

Wickliff waved the words away.

"Now," he protested, "do not pick holes in my theory or in my appearance, for I will not have it. What is a grizzle here or a wrinkle there, if you have got a young heart; and what is better still, a young stomach? I enjoy myself, I can assure you, as much as ever I did at twenty-five. I can eat well, I can drink well, I can smoke well. I treat myself to every pleasure I can afford—and I can afford a good many—and the long and short of it all is that I have made up my mind to marry Gondoline, and that I shall be very much surprised if I don't succeed."

Gregory sighed a little as he listened to his friend's vehement determination.

"My dear fellow," he said dubiously, "I suppose you know what is best for you, and it is not for me to advise or suggest. I was about half your age when I married Gondoline's mother. Well, well, that is all past and gone long ago. I suppose you wouldn't take it very kindly, Wicky, if I were to mention that Gondoline takes after her mother in more ways than in appearance."

Wickliff took his meaning and took it with perfect good-humour.

"You mean that Gondoline number two has a temper of her own, and is a bit headstrong and wilful and selfish, and a few other little things like that?"

Winbush nodded agreement with the items of this catalogue. It seemed to him to be a somewhat curious catalogue to come from a lover's lips. Wickliff guessed what he was thinking and laughed.

"You musn't think," he said, "that because I am in love with Gondoline, and because I am ready to marry her, that I am such a Juggins as to think, or to pretend to think, that she is perfection. I pretty well know what her faults are."

"And knowing all that," Winbush quavered mildly, "you still wish to marry the girl?"

"I do that," Wickliff answered coolly. "Twenty odd years ago you wanted to marry the same girl in an earlier edition."

"But it was twenty odd years ago," Winbush argued, "and I did not know her faults before I married her, as you seem to do."

"Oh," Wickliff said confidently, "that's all right. I think I can manage Gondoline if I give my mind to it; and, anyhow, the game is worth the candle."

Gregory looked at him with a dreary smile. His own experiences with the earlier Gondoline were not of a kind that encouraged him to regard his friend's future, if he succeeded in his purpose, hopefully. But he recognized that Wickliff was a very different man from himself and would undoubtedly make a very different kind of a husband.

"Ah," he said gloomily, "you are restless, that's what is it. You are restless because you have no occupation in life. You ought to have a hobby."

"I have," Wickliff answered instantly. "Gondoline the Second."

"I think," Winbush urged, with all the wondering emphasis of the small man serious, "if I were you, I should give up this idea of marrying Gondoline. There were many times, I assure you, now that we are speaking intimately, when I wished I had never entertained the idea of marrying Gondoline Prima."

His little bit of Latin tickled his vanity, and he chuckled and rubbed his hands, while Wickliff observed him with an expressionless face.

"Steer clear of Gondoline Secunda," Gregory persisted, abiding by his advice and his mild humour, "if you are a wise man."

Wickliff did not seem in the least annoyed or perturbed by his friend's counsel. His russet eyes twinkled; his lips relaxed into amiability.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I have never set up for being a wise man. I am just one of your happy-go-lucky, rough-and-tumble, hand-to-mouth sort of chaps, who drift about the world and learn what little they do learn, like other fools, by the wisdom of fools—experience. Now I have tested many experiences, but never yet the experience of marriage with a Gondoline. I wanted to do so years ago, but you interfered then very successfully. I want to do so again, here, now, to-day. Don't try to interfere again, old man, for it won't do."

Winbush made a funny little face, as if he were munching a very sour apple. Evidently he was chewing the cud of bitter fancy.

"Well," he ruminated, "I suppose you will try to have your own way—you always were like that—but you didn't succeed with Gondoline Prima, and it doesn't follow that you will succeed with Gondoline Secunda. I must honestly say that I think you will be a little fortunate if you do not. Gondoline is a dear girl, of course"—here he made the funny little face again—"but so far as my powers of observation go, I must confess that I find Gondoline exceedingly like her mother."

"Perhaps that is just what most interests me in the lass," Wickliff suggested, with a queer expression on

his face. He knew how oddly much the repetition of the Gondoline of yesterday in the Gondoline of to-day meant to him. "Don't you think you may be just a little hard on the memory of the late Mrs. Winbush?"

Gregory gave an uneasy shiver, and glanced over his shoulder nervously, as if he feared that he might be overheard, though, indeed, there was no one to overhear him except his companion. He urged his chair a little nearer to Wickliff, gave a small, hesitating cough, and then spoke rapidly in a confidential semi-whisper:

"I don't think so," he said, and there was a kind of earnest sadness in his voice that struck Wickliff just then as being curiously pathetic. "I really don't think so. Of course, I don't pretend to suggest that I am or was a very attractive man, and it is just possible that a more attractive man, a man better endowed with the social graces, a man like you, in short, might have done better with Gondoline than I ever managed to do. But I doubt it—indeed, I doubt it."

He paused for a moment, meditatively nursing one knee with clasped hands. Wickliff found it hard to restrain an indecent exhibition of mirth at the picture Winbush had drawn of him, Wickliff, as the man with the social graces. He thought, and he knew that he thought, no small potatoes of himself—to adopt his own felicitous terminology—and he knew also that he was perfectly justified in so thinking. But it diverted him to be regarded as a Chesterfield, as a Nut, as a member of the Crutch and Toothpick brigade. The latter term was still going in the South-Eastern district when Wickliff quitted Newington Butts for ever, and it came, anachronistically, into his mind now.

As for Gregory, he sat and rocked to and fro, while Wickliff watched him in a humorously attentive silence

that appreciated the pathos and the irony of the little man's confessions.

"My dear old chap," he said, "it's no go. I quite understand the spirit which prompts you, and I take what you say in the best possible part, but I've made up my mind. I want to marry Gondoline, and I mean to marry Gondoline."

Winbush sighed heavily.

"Then I suppose we must leave it at that," he said gloomily.

Wickliff responded cheerfully.

"We must leave it at that."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MOUSE-TRAP

THE next morning Wickliff motored off early to town and penetrated into the depths of the City. He was back again at Brindling Common and Tennis-Court House by noon. With an audacity born of the sense of his new co-partnership with Winbush, he made so bold as to do a deed that had never been done since the coming of the new tenant. He actually knocked at the door of communication between the hall and the workshop, and Gregory heard him and came out, and did not seem in the least put about or annoyed.

"What is it?" he asked cheerfully, for he regarded Wickliff now as his right-hand man in the struggle to preserve the Secret which had once been the Purpose from the mysterious enemy. If Wickliff summoned him thus, Wickliff probably had something to say to him. Wickliff had something to say.

"I tootled down into the City this morning; I wanted to see if I could find out anything about the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate. I couldn't. Nobody I asked about it had ever heard of it. That doesn't prove, of course, that it has no existence, but it shows that it must be quite the modest violet kind of touch."

"Dear, dear!" Winbush clucked. Persistently bird-like, he seemed to-day more like a ruffled hen than any other ornithological specimen.

"Then," Wickliff continued, "I looked in at Baumberg & Baumberg's. The manager, a most affable personage, named MacArdle, though perhaps a little too extravagantly Scotch, professed a complete ignorance of the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, and of its specious bagman, Simpson P. Gorrington. He further assured me that the firm were not in the slightest degree concerned about your little account, and had not the faintest intention of dunning you for it."

Winbush turned an inquiring eye upon his friend.

"Was it wise to ask all that? If they have anything to do with the matter, they will think we have our suspicions."

"Not at all," Wickliff replied blithely. "They will think we suspect the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate, but they will not think that we have any suspicions of Baumberg & Baumberg. So that's all right. Then I made a few inquiries about the place of business where your young friend Mr. Trevor is employed, and found it all bright and smiling and as English as you please."

"Why shouldn't it be English," Mr. Winbush asked, with an air of patient bewilderment, "when the lad happens to be an Englishman?"

"There is some old buster in a play," Wickliff remarked reflectively, "who always goes mooning about and saying 'I wonder' at every possible opportunity. I guess he'd have a chance to show himself off at Brindling just now."

"Why?" Mr. Winbush queried, with a certain acidulation of fretfulness in his tone, which always made its appearance when, as now, he was at all muddled.

"Oh, just because," Wickliff answered unsatisfactorily enough. Then he went on: "Tell me all you

know about young Trevor. You have always taken him for an Englishman, haven't you?"

"Certainly," Gregory corroborated. "I believe he was born and reared in Canada, but he's been in business in England for some years now. He came to live in Brindling because he was advised that the air would be good for his health."

"He doesn't look exactly what I should call a delicate flower," Wickliff commented.

"No," Gregory admitted. "No. The lad looks strong enough. But it seems he needs country air as much as possible, and our Brindling air is proverbial."

Wickliff listened to Winbush without any sign of impatience, but also without any sign of interest. He mused aloud:

"He certainly seems as English as they make 'em, but that would be tremendously to his advantage if he were really up to any hanky-panky."

He turned to Gregory and commanded his attention by prodding him vigorously in the chest with an extended forefinger while he continued to speak emphatically:

"If he really were what I will not say I think him, but what I will say that it is at least possible he might be, then, however well he knows English, there will be a language that he probably knows better."

Winbush, perplexed by Wickliff's reflections repeated his last words vacantly: "One that he probably knows better."

"Quite so," Wickliff confirmed. "If I remember rightly our young friend does not profess to be a linguist."

"No," Gregory affirmed. "I understand that he doesn't know a word of any language but English."

"That," said Wickliff dryly, "is what I am going to find out."

By this time Gregory had given up being astonished by the vagaries of his friend.

"How?" he asked.

"I have half a mind to play a little trick on Mr. Trevor," Wickliff said thoughtfully.

"How?" Gregory asked. "Why?"

Wickliff came close to his friend and spoke in a low voice.

"Can you remember these words?" he asked. Then he said very slowly and distinctly: "*Lieber Gott, der Kaiser ist tod!*"

Gregory slowly and awkwardly repeated the words after Wickliff.

"What do they mean?" he asked.

"They mean," Wickliff answered, "'Dear God, the Emperor is dead.'" He stopped and surveyed for an instant with amusement Winbush's staring face of amazement; then he resumed:

"Now if I say this suddenly when he is taken unawares and he shows that he understands what I am saying, that will be just a bit curious, will it not?"

Winbush wagged his head and looked profoundly wise.

"And how if he doesn't?" he questioned, with the look of one that puts a poser.

Wickliff laughed. "Well, that won't be curious at all," he confessed. "However, we shall see what we shall see."

As he spoke, his careless glance, travelling through the open window into the garden, was arrested by the sight of two figures in white that were wandering slowly side by side along the path to the house. They were

Gondoline and young Trevor. They made a pleasing pair, but Wickliff observed them without pleasure.

"Here comes Gondoline," he said, "with the young gentleman we have been discussing. He haunts the house a bit, doesn't he?"

Gregory admitted the fact deprecatingly.

"It's holiday-time and he hasn't a great many friends here, and Gondoline seems to like him."

"Gondoline seems to like him all right," Wickliff copied grimly. "How well Gondoline looks."

Gregory got up and looked into the garden. He surveyed the advancing Gondoline with no exaggerated signs of parental enthusiasm.

"And you really want to marry that," he said.

Wickliff was unabashed.

"I do. Twenty odd years ago you wanted to marry that, too, you know."

Any reply that Winbush might have attempted to make was prevented by the entry of the young people. They came gaily into the room, swinging their racquets with a great appearance of having enjoyed themselves amazingly.

Winbush blinked at them affably. He was not an observant person, but it occurred to him at that moment that if young Trevor were to fall in love with Gondoline, it might save his old friend Wickliff a great deal of trouble hereafter.

"Well, youngsters," he chirped, "have you had a good time?"

Gondoline declared that it had been ripping. Trevor, more emphatic, insisted that it was simply corking. Wickliff exchanged amiable greetings with the pair.

At this moment the maid entered the room with an early edition of an evening paper, which Wickliff had

arranged to have sent to Tennis-Court House daily as well as to The Minarets, so that at whichever place he might be he should have it to hand. He took it carelessly from the maid, who promptly disappeared.

"I'll see if there is any news," he said, and seated himself.

"There never is in those early editions," Trevor said. He had placed himself at the piano, with his back to Wickliff, who slowly opened the paper. Gondoline went up to her father.

"Dad, may I ask Mr. Trevor to stay to luncheon?"

"Certainly, child, certainly," Gregory answered, full of his new idea.

Gondoline moved towards Trevor, to proffer him the expected invitation, when she was suddenly arrested in her course.

Suddenly Wickliff rose to his feet, waving the newspaper in his hand. He cried out in a loud, excited voice the words he had agreed upon with Winbush: "*Lieber Gott, der Kaiser ist tod!*"

Instantly Trevor swung round on the music-stool and turned towards Wickliff.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" he cried in a voice of shrill alarm.

Wickliff tossed his newspaper on to the table and smiled blandly upon the agitated young man.

"I didn't know you knew German, Mr. Trevor," he said, politely surprised, politely curious.

In a second Trevor's face that had grown pale, flushed ruddy again; then he was tranquilly himself again, composed, athletic, floridly British.

"No more I do," he declared cheerfully, "at least, no more than three words." He was engagingly ingenuous as he proceeded to amplify his admission. "There was a chap at our office, a foreign chap, who whenever

anyone told him anything, always said: '*Gott in Himmel!*'"—Mr. Trevor's pronunciation was now crudely insular—"which I believe means something like 'You don't say so.'"

Wickliff took the young gentleman's ready explanation in very good part.

"It is something like that," he admitted genially.

Trevor went on with perfect composure, and the almost boyish simplicity which Gondoline thought became him so well.

"So when you said something in some blooming lingo or other, I thought I would not be bested without an effort, and so I chipped in with my little lot. What was the meaning of your gibberish, anyway?"

Wickliff accepted this explanation with a countenance whose expression implied the most contented credulity.

"I picked up my phrase," he explained, "from a man I used to know over yonder." He jerked his head in the direction of Latin America. "Whenever anything happened that pleased him, or whenever he wanted to keep up his spirits, he used to shout out '*Lieber Gott, der Teufel ist tod!*' and I caught the trick from him and find myself parroting him every now and then."

"And what may the words mean?" the young man asked, with a careless manner, which seemed to show that he asked more from a desire to please Wickliff than from any interest of his own.

"They mean," Wickliff replied promptly, "'Dear God, the devil is dead!'"

Trevor laughed heartily, with unconstrained voice, with untroubled face.

"That's a rum phrase," he said; "but after all, it sounds as well in English as in Dutch, or whatever it is. I never cared to waste my time over foreign lan-

guages, as so many chaps do nowadays. English is good enough for me, all round the clock and every time."

Wickliff clapped his hands approvingly.

" May I say 'Righto,' " he begged. " Also 'Cheero.' Your sentiments do you credit. It is a great gratification to one who has lived so long away from England to find that the good old bulldog breed is not fading out, and that the old spirit which won Trafalgar and Waterloo is still so splendidly alive."

Trevor manifested much gratification at Wickliff's expression of approval.

" Glad to hear you say so," he declared. " That's the way I feel about it, from start to finish."

" 'Britons,' " Wickliff caroled, " 'never, never, never shall be slaves.' "

CHAPTER XXV

AN ARCADIAN EPISODE

THOUGH the two men were talking so amiably and looking so amiable, Gondoline seemed to feel a kind of strain in the situation, a sense of strain which she could not understand. She thought that her father was looking oddly at Charlie Trevor; she thought that Wickliff was in some inexplicable way trying to tease Charlie Trevor. She felt annoyed on her friend's behalf.

"Well," she said sharply, "I think it is very rude as well as very silly to go on saying things that other people don't understand, just to show off what a lot one knows oneself. I'm sure I hope you won't do it any more."

"I certainly will not," Wickliff promised happily, taking the girl's reproof with perfect good-humour, even with a hint of contrition in his bearing, as if he felt that he had deserved the reproof.

Gregory, standing near the door of his workshop, watching the speakers and rubbing his chin, meditatively seemed to think that the incident was exhausted. He had decided to invite his friend to visit his mysterious workshop, and this seemed a convenient moment to do so. "Will you come with me, Wickliff?" he asked, and pointed to the workshop door.

Wickliff obeyed the summons with a fine show of alacrity.

"Certainly, my boy, certainly," he said.

Winbush unlocked the door, motioned to Wickliff to precede him, followed swiftly in his footsteps. In another instant came the familiar sound of the key turning as Winbush locked the door on the other side.

Gondoline's gaze followed the two men till they disappeared. She felt oddly that there was something going on which she did not understand, and she wished she knew what it was. She turned to Trevor, and found that while her back was turned he had caught up the newspaper that Wickliff had discarded and was eagerly studying it. As Gondoline turned round, his sudden interest in the newspaper suddenly ceased. He flung it back on the table with an inarticulate sound.

Gondoline turned to him an inquiring face.

"What was all that fuss about German?" she asked.
"It all seemed very silly and meaningless."

"Oh, it was nothing," Trevor answered indifferently.
"I suppose the old buster wanted to show off his knowledge."

If Gondoline had been annoyed with Wickliff a minute earlier, now she was annoyed with Trevor.

"Mr. Hersham is not an old buster," Gondoline said resentfully. She had come to regard Wickliff as very much her own property, and few people like to hear their possessions disparaged. And Wickliff had been a jolly good friend to her, and his latest gift, quite a costly little toy for Brindling, was pinned into the neck of her blouse.

Trevor only laughed at her fretfulness, a frank, hearty, manly laugh, with no maliciousness in it.

"Oh, yes he is," he insisted cheerily, "he is an old buster to you and me. He is all right in his way; quite a good sort and all the rest of it, considering that he

has lived so long abroad, but he is out of the running for the Gondoline stakes. You and I are young; we are the rising generation, we are the reality, we are the people that count."

"Are we?" Gondoline asked doubtfully. She did not quite understand what he was saying, but she could not help recognizing that she thought he looked very nice and clean and kissable.

"Why, of course we are," he declared, with a fine air of youthful authority ringing in his words. "Your excellent old friend belongs to the past. He is a back number, very interesting in his day, no doubt, but not to us. Our lives are still to make. Our loves are still to make. Life is love for us, isn't it Gondoline?"

"I don't know," Gondoline answered pensively. There was a wistful look on her face and a wistful sound in her voice. Not so very long ago she had been pretty sure that she was in love with Wickliff Hersham. Then Charles Trevor turned up, and she thought she had made up her mind that she was in love with him. Now she felt oddly at a loss to decide what she really thought. But she was quite sure that Charlie was very pleasant to listen to and very pleasant to look at.

"Yes, you do," Trevor insisted. "You are young, you are beautiful. I am sure that you know in your heart that youth is the only time worth living, and that for a beautiful girl like you to be loved and to love is the best thing in the world."

His blue eyes, fixed on her troubled face, were full of fire; his voice thrilled with passionate admiration; he seemed very earnest and attractive.

"I don't know," Gondoline answered doubtfully. "If what you say is true, then Mr. Hersham ought to be

considered young, for I think that he can be very much in love."

"Good Lord!" Trevor protested. "I hope you do not call that sort of thing love. It is only amorous decrepitude, the senile desire for the sour grapes. It is like wanting to play with hoops and peg-tops, or any other madhouse fancy."

"And I suppose you think you know all about love?" Gondoline asked thoughtfully. She felt that she was on the edge of important decisions, and her mind was in a turmoil of doubt and wonder.

Trevor's reply was briskly confident.

"I should rather think I do. I am young, I am alive, I am full of life. Will you let me teach you all I know about love, pretty girl? What I don't know isn't worth knowing."

Gondoline eyed him with a slightly malicious smile. Vaguely she resented the boastfulness of his speech.

"I am afraid I have so much to learn," she said slyly, "that I should want a lifetime for the task."

Trevor rose to the occasion gallantly. His voice was more earnest, his glance more glowing than ever.

"What more delightful for me," he protested, "than a lifetime spent with you, and spent so pleasantly."

Gondoline parried his phrase with a faint note of mockery in her voice.

"And what more delightful for me than a lifetime spent with you. Is not that what I am expected to say?"

"Well, why not," the young man asked boldly, "if you can be made to think so."

Gondoline sighed. She felt strangely uncertain of herself, of what she hoped, of what she wished. She

spoke more as if she were addressing herself than her companion.

"The question is, can I?"

Trevor came a little nearer to her, and there was a determined look on his face.

"Well," he answered confidently, "honestly I think so."

Gondoline skipped back with a swing of her skirts and grinned impudently at him.

"Cheek!" she cried, "cheek! cheek! cheek!"

She looked at him provocatively, more provocatively perhaps than she knew, for she made a pretty picture of tantalizing insolence as she swayed lightly there in front of him with her hands poised on her hips and her eyes gleaming mischievously. She was very tempting, but she was not deliberately conscious that she was offering temptation. She was only stimulated and excited by his words and by her thoughts.

The young man came a little closer to her. She always liked the way he moved, full of ease and strength, like a young animal in the open. Now, at his approach she was conscious of a mingled fascination and fear, the kind of emotion she might well have felt if she had made a pet of some wild beast cub which she was accustomed to pat and fondle, and it suddenly turned upon her. Yet, she could not realize the meaning of that subtle sense of menace, for the young man's eyes were full of admiration.

"Cheek, indeed," he retorted, echoing her word. "I like that. Nothing of the kind. Reasoned confidence, I assure you."

He was quite near her as he spoke, and Gondoline felt suddenly aware that she ought to put out her hands and try to push him away. But she had not time to

give the instinctive action play. In another second he had pinioned her tightly in his arms, was holding her body close against his own. His face was very near to her face, and his eyes were burning upon hers.

"Gondoline," he cried, and the sound of her name rang in her ears like a shout of passionate triumph, "Gondoline I love you!"

Gondoline was a strong girl, lithe and supple and vigorous, but she was as helpless as a child in the sweet rigour of her lover's clasp. Instantly her excited mind, obedient imp of her excited body, recalled a coloured picture, a brightly-tinted post-card that she loved and that she kept stuck in a corner of the looking-glass in her bedroom. It was a reproduction of a well-known painting, though she did not realize this, but always thought of it just as it was, small and bright and sensuous. It represented a brown Arcadian youth girt in goat-skins, who was clasping a lovely white-skinned girl very tightly to his breast. The pair stood so together in the thick grass dotted with scarlet flowers, the man passionate force, the maid rapturous surrender. She had often looked at it fondly and wondered and hungered, unconsciously almost, for something that was not suburban. Now suddenly she seemed to be caught up and carried in a flash to that fair, unknown country, to feel the grasp of the brown goatherd ringed around her, his warm breath upon her cheek, and to savour the scent of trampled grasses and crushed blossoms about their steadfast feet.

These were the thoughts that came thronging to her swiftly in the first pulses of attack. What she said was, "Let me alone," and she did not say it very strenuously.

The man was in no mood to be dissuaded by a far more insistent appeal.

"Why should I let you alone?" he asked, commanding and wooing in the same breath. "I love you, and you love me, for you do, you know you do."

Challenge of denial rang in his eager speech. He thrust his face forward and kissed her on the lips many times.

Gondoline struggled faintly against his caresses. She was not unused to kisses, but these, coming as they did, unnerved her, stirred her, frightened her.

"No, I don't," she repudiated his boast. Then, as he kissed her again denial seemed to swoon. "Yes, I do," she gasped, and then fearful at this yielding, she writhed impotently in his arms. "Let me go, oh, let me go," she pleaded, and she knew in her heart that for the time at least she desired to be set free.

"Not me," was the youth's decisive answer, simplicity itself. He was in a whirl of excitement and delight, and he strained his captive tighter to him and held his mouth against hers. But if Gondoline's senses were troubled, her wits were not disarmed. Through all the storm in which she seemed to sway she was still alert to every-day realities. She could hear the sound of feet in the corridor leading from the workshop.

She twisted her face away. "Look out!" she whispered; "there is someone coming."

Trevor, pausing, listened. He, too, heard the advancing footsteps. It was no part of his purpose to stand with Gondoline in his arms before unsympathetic spectators. He loosed his hold. Gondoline glided nimbly from his embrace and flung herself, as it were, upon the pianoforte. The key turned in the lock. Gondoline was playing and singing, and Trevor was lolling lazily upon the settee when Wickliff entered the room

followed by Winbush. Both seemed in high good-humour.

"I thought I heard music," Wickliff said, beaming upon the pair. "Capital!" He dropped into a comfortable arm-chair, with the air of one who is settling down to enjoy himself. "I feel very musical this afternoon. Go it, Gondoline."

CHAPTER XXVI

POST-PRANDIAL

ON the evening of the same day young Mr. Trevor came leisurely along the garden of Tennis-Court House and entered by the open French windows. It had become a recognized custom now, short as his acquaintance with the Winbushes had been, for him to come across and join them after dinner on those evenings when he was not dining with them.

Generally he found the father and daughter seated in the hall, having quitted the dining-room, for it was their custom to drink their after-dinner coffee in the hall. On this occasion it would seem that Mr. Trevor was earlier than his wont, for the hall was deserted; but Mr. Trevor showed no sign of disappointment at the absence of his friends. He moved hither and thither about the room with an air of diligent interest in its disposition. It was already a familiar room to him, but he seemed to wish to make it more familiar, so persistently did he perambulate it in this direction and that.

He made a pause to survey with an air of marked approval the writing-table which stood by the wall near the windows. This writing-table was regarded as Gondoline's special altar; only to be used by the profane through favour of the special permission of its priestess. It was a gift to the girl from Wickliff, a costly and serviceable affair, which Gondoline had admired one afternoon in a Regent Street shop in the days when she

had begun to discover that for her to admire anything when she was in Wickliff's company was the royal road to becoming its possessor. It was elaborately and ingeniously constructed in rosewood and gold with all sorts of appliances for making the process of letter-writing entertaining and delightful.

There was a fascinating standish with comely bottles for many kinds of inks, black and coloured. There was a dainty apparatus for the process of sealing one's completed epistles, with its spirit-lamp, its magazine of sticks of wax of various tints. There were a pair of exquisite bottles, each with its golden-handled brush, one for gum, and the other for water for the damping of postage-stamps and the flaps of envelopes. There were nests of attractive stationery with Gondoline's monogram on it; there were drawers stored with noble quills of gorgeous hues, that must surely have been plucked from the wings of the geese of a fairy-tale or the birds of Helicon. There was a paper-knife that seemed to have been fashioned from the tusk of a mammoth. There were golden seals that bore quaint devices on their faces, but the handsomest of all had on it only the girl's initials, "G. W." There were golden penholders and golden caskets for pens and a golden match-box, and a gold-mounted blotting-book, whose pages rivalled the hues of Iris, and a gold-mounted note-book, and a gold-mounted diary, and a gold-mounted calendar. Also, there was a gold cigarette-case, and a gold pencil-case, and a gold-handled penknife, and many another rich and pleasurable trinket.

It had cost a great deal of money, so much that the sound of the sum had staggered Gondoline, but Wickliff had paid for it as coolly as you please, and for the moment Gondoline had adored the donor. She did not use her present very much, in truth, for she seldom wrote

letters and never wrote anything else except rare and spasmodic entries in the little golden diary. But it was a very brilliant, opulent affair, taking it by and large, and Gondoline was very proud of it, and wished that there were many callers at Tennis-Court House to whom its sumptuous mysteries might be disclosed. But alas! there were no such callers.

Had there been any such they could scarcely have manifested more interest in its charms than young Mr. Trever now manifested. Of course, it had been elaborately exhibited to him on the occasion of his first visit, and, of course, he had often glanced at it since. But on the afternoon of this particular day it had been brought to his notice in a more particular manner.

When Mr. Winbush, accompanied by Wickliff, had emerged from the workshop, and had interrupted the course of his vehement wooing of Gondoline, Mr. Winbush was carrying in his hand a long, official-looking envelope. He had formally asked Gondoline's permission to be allowed to seal it at her precious writing-table, and Gondoline, with a great show of conferring an inestimable favour, had accorded the permission, and had herself set in motion the machinery for carrying out the ceremonial. She had lit the little spirit-lamp, and had asked her father what coloured wax he wanted and what kind of seal. Mr. Winbush had answered that he wanted plain red wax, simple and official-looking, and he requested the use of the seal with the girl's initials, which were also his own. Mr. Winbush stuck down the gummed flap of the envelope, and then sealed it with a large seal of red wax, duly impressed with the initials of the seal.

When this process was completed, Mr. Winbush had carefully addressed the envelope with his own fountain-

pen, and instead of using the blotting paper, had left it to dry of itself. He quitted the table for a moment to speak to Wickliff. At that moment Trevor, who had been sitting near the table, had risen to take his departure, and it so happened that in rising he had caught a sight of the letter again, and been able to read the address, which was that of a high official at the War Office. Mr. Winbush then took up the letter, satisfied himself that the superscription was now dry and carried it back into the workshop. He returned in a few seconds, and locked the workshop door as usual. Trevor heard him say to Wickliff on his return: "Thank goodness, that's done," and Wickliff had smiled and said something about congratulations. A little later Trevor had taken his leave. He had been asked to stay to dinner, but had declined, promising, however, to come round in the evening.

He surveyed now the writing-table with an amused scrutiny. He took up the seal which bore Gondoline's initials, looked at it and set it down again. Then for a few moments he resumed his perambulation of the room with the same air of lively interest in the not unfamiliar surroundings as before.

His interest and his exercise had ceased, however, before the conclusion of the Winbush dinner. He was seated in an arm-chair and turning over the pages of a book, when Gondoline came into the room followed by her father and by Wickliff, who had remained to dinner.

Trevor rose and saluted the company easily. He was in evening-dress and looked well in it. He was always scrupulous to don white shirt and dinner-jacket even when he dined alone at his rooms. Now his trimness gave him an advantage. Winbush never by any chance

would consent to change his clothes for dinner; but Wickliff, who habitually did, had spent the afternoon at Tennis-Court House, and had not troubled to go over to The Minarets before dinner.

Gondoline waved him a greeting.

"Oh, there you are!" she said.

"Here I am," Trevor answered simply, as if the fact of his presence called for verbal confirmation.

"Where," Wickliff questioned, "could youth better be than awaiting the coming of beauty?"

Gregory proffered hospitality.

"Why didn't you come in and have a glass of wine? Will you——"

He pointed towards the dining-room door as he spoke. Trevor declined.

"No, thank you, sir. I've had my pint of bitter."

Wickliff looked at him with an air of well-affected surprise. "Don't you prefer Pilsener?" he asked. "I do."

Trevor shook his head emphatically.

"Not much. British beer, like British beef, is good enough for yours truly."

Wickliff looked an approval, which, indeed, he felt, less, however, for the sentiment than for what he took to be a well-sustained game of bluff.

"Ah! you are an incorrigible patriot," he said, with an enthusiasm which Trevor affected to accept as genuine.

Winbush, uninterested by the conversation, came up to Wickliff and caught him by the arm.

"Shall we have our smoke in the garden?" he suggested. "It's delightfully mild out there."

"By all means," Wickliff agreed.

As the two men drifted out through the open window

Gondoline warned them: "I'll call you when coffee is ready." She pretended amazement at finding that Trevor chose to remain in the room. "Aren't you going too?"

"Not much," Trevor answered, "if I may remain here."

"Of course you may," Gondoline accorded graciously. "Give me a cigarette."

Trevor picked out a cigarette from the little gold case on the writing-table, handed it to the girl and struck a match.

"Right?" he asked, as the end of Gondoline's cigarette glowed to the flame, and Gondoline, sending a dainty spiral into the air, answered "Right."

Trevor lit a cigarette for himself, and Gondoline perched herself gaily on the edge of the table, and sat there, swinging her dainty feet.

"Now I feel comfy," she asserted.

"I feel as if I were in Paradise," Trevor replied ecstatically.

Gondoline grinned at him derisively.

"Don't be a cuckoo," she said. "Paradise hasn't got much to say to Brindling."

"Oh, yes, it has," Trevor retorted. "Brindling is Paradise, at least, so long as you are in Brindling."

Gondoline looked at him thoughtfully through filmy rings of smoke. She was thinking of the love-making of the afternoon, unable to make up her mind if she was pleased or angry at what had happened.

"You can talk a lot of nonsense when you like, can't you?" she said, with a pretty air of profundity.

"Perhaps I can," the youth admitted; "but also I can talk a lot of sense, and never more so than when I try to tell you all that you mean to me."

He spoke very earnestly; he looked very earnest. Gondoline was quite willing to encourage him. She was as far from making up her mind as ever, but it was always amusing to be wooed.

"Well, don't be shy," she commanded. "Have a slap at it."

The youth glowed. "May I really? Where shall I begin?"

Gondoline quoted from the immortal Alice. "Begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop."

"To begin at the beginning," Trevor said, with a complimentary intensity, "you are very beautiful. To continue, you are very beautiful. To come to the end, you are very beautiful."

Gondoline permitted herself to blush a little. It pleased her to be praised, as it pleased her to eat sweets, as it used to please her to read Pitlow's "Penny Novelettes" in the days before she discovered that she, too, was a heroine of romance.

"What a fellow you are to chaff," she protested, with a look that assured the speaker that she took his words at their full value.

"To begin at the beginning," Trevor repeated, "I love you. To continue, I love you. To come to the end, I love you."

Gondoline took her cigarette from her lips, flicked a particle of ash on to the floor, and aired indifference.

"Anything else?" she asked pertly. "Please go on. Pile it up; I don't mind."

"Why should you mind the truth?" the young man questioned in his tenderest tones.

Somehow the tenderness had not its proper effect upon Gondoline. She was a little puzzled at the discovery and a little annoyed. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Law! as if I believed such nonsense! I'm afraid you are an awful flirt, Charlie."

Trevor was uncomfortably conscious that he was not making all the impression that he desired to make, that he expected to make; that his enterprise of the afternoon had not advanced him as much as he had hoped.

"I'm nothing of the kind," he insisted. "I'm too jolly serious about you to go in for that kind of piffle."

He came a little nearer to the girl and spoke in a low, eager voice.

"May I kiss you, Gondoline?"

Gondoline shook her cigarette at him, playfully minatory.

"No fear," she cried; "with the lamp here, and those two in the garden!"

The young man looked at her, trying with his glance at once to appeal and command.

"We might lower the lamp," he suggested artfully.

Gondoline treated the suggestion with ironic contempt.

"Yes, I don't think!" she commented sarcastically. "What would they say outside at such goings-on. Father wouldn't notice, of course, but there are no flies on Mr. Hersham."

Trevor silently registered a wish for the swift damnation of Mr. Hersham. Aloud, he proffered a new suggestion.

"Then come over here, by the screen. No one can see us there."

Gondoline blankly declined the proposal.

"No, I won't!" she said sharply. "It's too cold-blooded, preparing like that. And, besides, I don't think I want to kiss you."

Trevor looked at her steadily, trying to renew the mastery which he thought was his to command.

"Are you sure?" he questioned. "I think you do." Gondoline puffed a cloud of smoke at him.

"I'm sure I don't," she persisted. Her mind was not as sure as her speech suggested, but for the moment her desire to tease was stronger than the desire to be caressed.

"You do," Trevor insisted doggedly; and Gondoline retorted with a feline stubbornness:

"I don't!"

Trevor tried to catch her in his arms, but she eluded him nimbly, skipping off the table and getting behind it as behind a rampart.

"Don't be a fool!" she said crossly. "I'm not going to make a galanty show of myself for Dad and Wicky. Now, be good, Charlie, or I shall be really vexed. I mean it."

"I don't want to be good," the young man grunted, very truthfully.

"Well, I do," Gondoline said, "under the circs., and that settles it; and, anyway, I think I hear Mary coming with the coffee."

Trevor moved away angrily. "Damn Mary, and damn the coffee!" he growled.

Gondoline reproved him.

"What is the matter with you to-night? You go on as if you were never going to see me again."

Trevor looked at her with all the sentimentality he could manage, and that was a good deal.

"If I were," he asked, "would you be more amiable?"

"I don't think so," Gondoline answered frankly, without needing to take time to consider the problem. "I should never waste time in bothering about people I wasn't going to see again."

At this stage in the game there came a knock at the

door, and in reply to Gondoline's summons to come in, the maid entered the room with the coffee. She had only to place it on the table and withdraw, but she seemed, to the impatient and irritated young gentleman, to take an age in the accomplishment of a simple act. When she had gone at last, he took up the broken threads of talk.

"Why are you so prudish to-night?" he asked querulously. "You don't seem a bit like yourself."

Gondoline laughed at him.

"Thank you for nothing. Don't be a goose. But I hate being hustled if I don't feel flirtatious?"

"Don't you feel flirtatious to-night?" Trevor asked pathetically.

Gondoline looked, and was doubtful.

"I don't think so," she said, after a meditative pause.

Trevor caught cunningly at the uncertainty suggested by her words.

"You don't think so!" he cried exultantly. "Then you don't know. How can you know till you try? Let's try and find out."

"Don't let's," Gondoline said promptly and decisively. "Will you please tell them that coffee is ready?"

Trevor looked the picture of disappointment. "Can't coffee wait a bit?" he hinted.

Gondoline showed great astonishment.

"And get cold," she exclaimed; "when Dad hates cold coffee. No, thank you."

The flagrant unreality of the excuse goaded Trevor into rebellion.

"You know that your father never knows or cares," he protested.

Gondoline gave him a quick glance under demurely lowered lids.

"Mr. Hersharn knows and cares," she said softly. If

she meant to irritate her companion by her show of solicitude for Wickliff's physical comfort she certainly succeeded.

"What does that matter?" he asked angrily.

Gondoline smiled sweetly into his scowling face.

"Now," she said firmly, "I'm not going to make poor Mr. Hersham drink cold coffee because you are in a mood for spooning when I am not."

She suddenly swung from her imperative mood to one of appeal.

"Don't tease me to-night, Charlie, there's a good boy. I feel queer and nervous, I tell you. Now will you call them, or will you not?—for if you don't, I will."

Trevor swallowed his rage with an effort.

"Oh, all right," he said explosively. He went to the window and shouted into the dim garden, where the two men were sauntering: "Coffee, coffee!" They were some way off, and they did not quicken their pace in response to his summons. There would be time for a little private talk with Gondoline still.

He returned to the girl, who was now ensconced in an arm-chair, and addressed her earnestly.

"Look here, Gondoline, suppose I were to speak to you very seriously indeed!"

"What about?" Gondoline asked, with a well-assumed show of wonder, though she guessed his theme readily enough.

"You know quite well," Trevor answered bluntly. "If I asked you to share my fortunes?"

Gondoline frowned and yawned.

"You are in a tiresome mood to-night," she said pettishly. "I wish to goodness you would let me alone."

Trevor was not to be warned off.

"No, but just suppose—" he began.

Gondoline interrupted him.

"Oh, Lord, what is the good of supposing? I don't want to be tied down just yet. I should probably hate you if I were married to you, and I think you are too young for my husband, anyway. You talk of my sharing your fortunes, but I don't know what your fortunes are. Have you lots and lots of money, Charlie?"

"No, of course not!" Trevor answered; then he amended hastily: "Not yet. I'm too young. But I mean to have, you bet."

"Well," said Gondoline, with exasperating composure, "when you have, it will be time to talk this kind of talk. Till then it's only a waste of time. But I can assure you I am no love-in-a-cottager, Charlie. You can take that from me, straight."

As she spoke, Wickliff and Gregory came in through the window, and she turned to them at once.

"Oh, here you are, you two. Serve you right if coffee's cold, not to come when you are called."

Trevor masked his mortification at the interruption and the unsatisfactory result of his conversation with Gondoline under an assumption of bluff hilarity.

"You can't say you didn't hear me, can you?"

"No, indeed!" Gregory assured him. "It was as good as a megaphone."

Winbush and Wickliff were both standing at the table gratefully accepting Gondoline's ministration of coffee. Gregory swallowed his quickly, and glanced inquiringly at Wickliff, who knew by habit what was coming.

"Have a game, old man?"

Wickliff nodded assent. Winbush always loved a game in the evening, and the game was always chess. Gregory was already busy at a side-table stationing the men and pieces on the board. Wickliff sipped his coffee

slowly, speculating as to the reasons for the signs of vexation on Gondoline's face.

"All's ready," Winbush announced eagerly from his side-table.

Wickliff set down his empty cup and joined him. Instantly they were deep in their game.

Gondoline addressed herself to the young man who was standing with his hands in his pockets staring at her.

"Won't you have some coffee, Mr. Trevor?"

The young man shook his head.

"No, thank you. Don't want to be kept awake."

"What does it matter holiday-time?" she asked.
"You haven't got to catch a train to-morrow."

Trevor looked unmistakably sulky.

"No; but I feel a bit fagged, and inclined to turn in early. So I think I'll say good-night."

Gondoline accepted the suggestion very cheerfully.
"Good-night," she said briskly.

Trevor came nearer to take her hand. Then she added, her voice lowered to a whisper: "Perhaps I shall be better tempered to-morrow."

Trevor brightened up at the hint. The chess-players were some distance off, and the conversation could be continued at the pitch set by Gondoline without fear of overhearing.

"Couldn't you be better-tempered to-night?" he entreated. "Come for a walk in the garden."

Gondoline gave a quick glance in the direction of Wickliff, who seemed to be wholly absorbed in his game.

"No," she said shortly. "I don't feel frivolous to-night."

Trevor glared an indignant protest.

"Do you call love frivolity?" he asked in hushed horror.

Gondoline, unwilling to admit so much, shifted her ground nimbly.

"Well, then, I don't feel sentimental to-night, and I'm not going into the garden."

Her bearing was so dictatorial that the young man seemed to consider it beneath his dignity to urge the matter further.

"Good-night," he said coldly and curtly. "Good-night," Gondoline echoed, equally cold, equally curt.

They shook hands. Trevor hesitated for a moment before relinquishing Gondoline's fingers, as if he had it still in his mind to say more. But the expression on Gondoline's face was not encouraging. He turned away and crossed the room to the chess-table.

"Good-night, Mr. Winbush. Good-night, Mr. Her-sham."

Gregory was too much absorbed in his strategy to be concerned with conventional adieux. He answered without looking up from his game.

"Good-night, Charlie, my boy. See you to-morrow, I suppose."

Wickliff looked up amiably at the departing guest.

"Good-night, Mr. Trevor. Pleasant dreams."

"I hope so," Trevor answered aggressively. "Pleasant dreams of pleasant realities."

"Good, indeed," Wickliff declared approvingly, and turned his attention to the game.

Trevor went slowly out of the room. He hoped that Gondoline would change her mind and see him off to the garden gate, but the hope was disappointed. Gondoline kept her seat and saw him disappear with a slight frown on her face.

Her mind was much perplexed. She had enjoyed her flirtation with Charlie Trevor during Wickliff's absence

in Paris enormously, and believed herself to be entirely released from the ascendancy which Wickliff had come to exercise over her. But with Wickliff's return his influence insidiously reasserted itself, all the more effectively because Wickliff, ostensibly, was so entirely willing that Gondoline should do as she pleased. What did she please? she asked herself, and failed to find any satisfactory answer.

CHAPTER XXVII

RETROSPECTION

THE two men had finished their game. They got up and came over to where Gondoline was sitting, pretending to read. Gregory had won, as he usually did, and he was amiably upbraiding Wickliff for not giving his whole mind to the game, and allowing himself to think of other things.

"The secret of success in life is to stick to one thing at a time," he pronounced pompously. He was thinking, no doubt, of how he had stuck to his Purpose and how he had at last achieved success.

"My dear philosopher," Wickliff questioned ironically, "what is success in life?"

Gregory reflected a moment before replying.

"Doing what one wants to do, I suppose?"

Wickliff exulted.

"Then I ought to be triumph's pattern, for I have always done what I wanted to do."

At this point Gondoline lowered her book and looked at the speaker challengingly. It was a boastful thing to say, but Wickliff did not look boastful.

"Have you, really?"

She was thinking that she knew of one thing which he wanted to do, and had not yet done—to make her say "Yes" to his wooing. Was he so sure that he would win her, after all? The sense of his quiet confidence oppressed her.

"Generally," Wickliff answered carelessly. "There must be exceptions to every rule; but on the whole, yes, generally."

Gregory chuckled.

"Don't you believe him, Gondoline. A rolling stone. But we don't mean the same thing. Perhaps I should define success as getting what one wants to get."

Gondoline was not, as a rule, profoundly interested in her parent's philosophic utterances, but this one took her attention, and she adopted it as the basis of another question to Wickliff.

"Do you always get what you want to get, Wicky?"

Wickliff smilingly gave the same response.

"Generally, Gondoline, thank you."

Winbush interposed.

"Then you can't have wanted very much to win the game to-night, on your own showing."

"I knew that it was hopeless from the beginning," Wickliff admitted with resignation. "It's no use striving against an inventor."

"Well," Winbush mused, "I suppose I ought to be good at games like chess if I have the scientific mind." He heaved a deep sigh. "But there, I won't say that I don't envy you sometimes, old man."

Wickliff looked at him quizzically, Gondoline with unconcealed surprise.

"I thought you were quite contented, Dad?"

Winbush turned on his offspring sharply.

"Who says I'm not contented, miss? I've done a great work and I'll make a great name, and I've never known a dull moment, not since your mother died. But—"

He paused, pensive.

"But what?" Wickliff jogged him.

Gregory went on slowly:

"Don't you remember, old man, how, when we were boys at that blessed academy, we used to plan out our futures? We were going to be pirates, and highwaymen, and treasure-seekers, and tiger-hunters; Mayne Reid, you know, and Ballantyne and Stevenson, and all that. You have come nearer to our boyish ideals than I have, when all is said and done, haven't you?"

Wickliff kept silence for a few seconds. He was thinking with much secret amusement that the running of a low-toned Variety Show in the Argentine was not precisely the kind of career that had been foreshadowed in the romances of their boyhood.

"I don't know about that," he said at length, reflectively. "I am not such a very desperate sort of person after all, am I, Gondoline?"

Gondoline scrutinized his amiable face with a renewed sense of curiosity. She realized his domination of her, and she resented it a little, and respected it a great deal. She admitted to herself that he looked very attractive just now. She found herself wishing that Charlie Trevor had never come to Brindling to trouble her ease and peace.

"I don't know," she said dubiously, in reply to Wickliff's jocular interrogation.

"I have never been exactly a pirate, or exactly a highwayman," Wickliff admitted, "though sometimes I may have borrowed a little of their methods. And if I happen to have come across treasure, it is not in the romantic way, but by the prosaic plan of strict attention to business. I've kept bad company occasionally, but one doesn't need to go to the waste places to keep bad company. That can be done in London—even in Brindling."

Gondoline rose and gravely dipped him a little curtsy.

"In the name of Brindling I thank you," she said. Then she sat down again and Wickliff continued:

"And if I have sinned a sin or two, I could have done the same thing just as pleasantly within the twelve-mile radius."

"Then, do you mean to say," Gregory asked, "that you might just as well have stayed at home?"

Wickliff denied the inference.

"Oh, dear no, I mean nothing of the kind. If I had stayed at home I shouldn't have made any money to begin with—and I liked making money my money; shouldn't have seen the world to go on with—and I liked seeing the world, I assure you. I believe I should have made a rattling good gentleman-adventurer in the days of Elizabeth. Knocking about the world has knocked some sense into me in the end."

There was a moment's lull in the unexpected confidences, a lull that was broken by Gondoline. She had been reading a story about Drake, and she pricked up her ears at Wickliff's words.

"Have you ever killed anyone, Wicky?" she asked eagerly.

He looked down impassively at her alert face. "Yes," he answered, in an unconcerned voice, as if the admission were of no account.

Gondoline gave a gasp of excitement.

"Oh, how often?"

Wickliff was amused at her excitement.

"Well, I didn't exactly make a habit of it. But I need not have travelled to the waste places for that. I might have stayed at home and been a doctor."

"Tell me all about it," Gondoline implored, wide-eyed. Wickliff laughed in her face.

"My dear Gondoline, why this sudden interest in my

career of crime? You never wanted to know anything about me before."

"I thought I knew everything about you."

Wickliff shook his head regretfully.

"No, my dear child, you didn't think about me at all. You took me as I was, and you were certainly very nice to me."

Gregory was yawning dismally. He found the conversation uninteresting and sought to bring it back to himself.

"Well, I don't think I should have been of much good in the waste places, as you call them," he said. "My business was here at home, with my work."

"Which," Wickliff said slowly, "will probably make you responsible for more bloodshed than a thousand pirates."

Winbush shrugged his shoulders. Wickliff addressed the girl again:

"I don't suppose anyone has ever called your attention to the fact before, but it's a queer world."

Gondoline resented his attitude. "Oh, go along!" she said fretfully.

Wickliff pretended to take her words literally.

"A very sensible suggestion, little girl. For here is father yawning his head off——"

"And why not?" Gregory asked indignantly. "Ten o'clock has been bed-time for me for the last fifteen years. I shouldn't have done what I have done if I hadn't been a man of regular habits."

Gondoline was vaguely aware of a difference in her father's manner during the last few days, a little strutting air, bird-like, as of triumph. Now, for an instant, at his words, she was tempted to ask him what he had done. But the temptation passed. She had never been

interested, she had never been allowed to be interested in her father's work.

Wickliff looked at the inventor compassionately.

"Does the past tense trouble you at all, Gregory? What have you done? Don't you feel a bit empty-minded, as it were?"

"Not at all," Gregory asserted stoutly. "I shall start on something else to-morrow."

Wickliff patted him on the back approvingly.

"Splendid adventurer! You see, you have your own kind of heroism. Yet I suppose you would be quite helpless if, in some physical emergency, you found that burglars were in the house, for instance."

Winbush looked all astonishment.

"My dear fellow, what could burglars want here. We have no valuables to tempt them. But if they did come, we are not so defenceless as you seem to think. I have a pistol—somewhere or other."

"How very useful," Wickliff commented ironically.

Gregory rubbed his chin, trying to locate the weapon.

"Let me see, where is it? Oh, I remember. It's in a drawer of that bureau there, on the landing."

He pointed, as he spoke, to the head of the stairs, where an old mahogany bureau had stood since Winbush's occupation of the place.

"Loaded, eh?" Wickliff asked.

Gregory looked uncertain.

"No, I don't think it's loaded. I got it years ago when I was at Clapham, and there was a sort of burglar scare in the neighbourhood. I had a few valuables then, but I got rid of them long ago."

Gondoline rose and laid her book upon the table.

"Well, I'm going to bed. If you two want to stand talking there all night you can."

Wickliff picked up the book she had abandoned and glanced at it.

"How do you like the book?"

"Silly, I call it. All about a pair of footling lovers that don't know their own minds."

"Ah!" Wickliff remarked; "they are very young, I suppose. Like you, Gondoline."

Gondoline tossed her head.

"Oh, I should know my own mind, right enough."

Wickliff winked teasingly.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Good-night, Dad. Good-night, Wicky."

She kissed her parent perfunctorily, and Winbush pecked at her cheek in return. She gave a hand to Wickliff, and frowned on him as she did so in reproof for his presumption.

Wickliff beamed upon the frowning girl. "Good-night," he wished her gaily, and Gregory, still yawning, echoed "Good-night."

Gondoline mounted the stairs to the landing. When she had got so far Wickliff called to her.

"Won't you take your book with you?"

Gondoline, resting a hand on the balustrade, looked back at him and made a contemptuous grimace.

"No fear! I'm sick of the piffle."

She made to disappear through the doorway that led to the bedrooms, but again her course was arrested. This time her father's voice detained her.

"Oh, Gondoline!" he called, "just look in that bureau drawer and see if there is a pistol there."

Gondoline turned to the bureau, pulled open a creaking drawer, and looked inside.

"There is a pistol here," she said indifferently, and jammed the drawer to again.

Gregory turned to Wickliff triumphant.

"I told you we were prepared for emergencies," I crowed.

Wickliff nodded. "Quite like the Government," I said affably. As he spoke, Gondoline vanished. Wickliff looked steadily after her, seeming to see her long after she had gone, accompanying her in spirit, thinking whimsical thoughts. One day or other, sooner or later he would be by her side on her journey upstairs.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SLEEPER AWAKENED

FOR a while silence brooded over the Winbush household, the conventional, habitual silence of the dwelling of a respectable suburban family that usually goes early to bed with a view, indeed, to being early to rise, but without any definite speculation as to the health, wealth and wisdom supposed to follow. Gregory, for his part, always tired himself out with his day's work, and was invariably yawning his head off by the time that the hour hand began to creep towards ten o'clock. He lost little time in getting to bed, and with him to be in bed and to be asleep were practically synonymous terms.

As for Gondoline, she always undressed leisurely. The process of doing her hair always took what she called an unconscionable time. Once in bed, she generally lay for an hour or so reading before she deemed it necessary to put her light out and dedicate herself to slumber.

The usual routine was observed on this particular evening, and by midnight Tennis-Court House was as quiet as if it were a temple consecrated to drowsiness or the cavern that sheltered the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

To paraphrase Wordsworth, the very furniture seemed asleep. The stillness as of a suburban doom brooded over the deserted hall sitting-room. The faint and very respectable tickings of the highly-respectable clock seemed only to accentuate, like the taps of muffled drums, the catafalquic tranquillity of the place. They seemed in

their persistent monotony, to be chiming an endless requiem for all the youths, the desires, the lusts, the aspirations. "Tick, tick, all is peace," they seemed to say. "Tick, tick, all is sleep. Tick, tick, all is, above all, respectability."

Yet the spirits of unease, and wakefulness, and disrepute were abroad that night, and seeking to work their will upon the lulled security of the Winbush household.

There came the faintest sound to mar the stillness, to mingle, companionably, with the respectable ticking of the respectable clock. It might have been the creaking of a warping board; it might have been the squeaking of a hungry mouse; it might have been any one of the many emphatic and unaccountable noises that are wont to punctuate the austere reserve of a respectable household that has duly and soberly retired for the night.

As a matter of fact, the noise, if so infinitesimal a sound deserved to be so called, was caused by the very careful turning of the handle of the door of the hall sitting-room. Then the door was opened very softly, and there came a sudden dart of light athwart the darkness.

A man, carrying an electric-torch in his hand, glided into the room. He stood for a few seconds in breathless silence, peering alertly into every corner of the room and listening with all his ears.

He gave a sigh of relief. There was nothing disquieting to be seen, nothing disquieting to be heard. The intruder seemed to be quite reassured, and at his ease. He crept noiselessly across the floor, lighting himself as he went with his electric-torch, till he came to the steel door, which shut off from the hall the corridor that conducted to Mr. Winbush's workshop. The man produced a small instrument from his pocket. Noiselessly he applied it to the lock, which presently yielded to his

persuasions; noiselessly he pushed the door sufficiently far back to allow his body to enter the aperture thus made; noiselessly he entered the passage, and as noiselessly closed the door behind him.

The hall sitting-room was again cloaked in its former darkness; once again the clock repeated its monotonous assertion. "Tick, tick, all is peace; tick, tick, all is sleep; tick, tick, all is, above all, respectability."

But the darkness and the quiet did not last long. In little more than a minute the workshop door opened anew; a gleam of light again stabbed the darkness, and the man came out holding his torch in one hand, and a long and bulky sealed envelope in the other. The man glided quietly and surely towards the writing-table, as one that knew his way well about the room and could avoid all obstacles to stealthy progress.

At the writing-table the man seated himself and proceeded to be very busy indeed. He lit the little spirit-lamp. No scrape of a match disturbed the silence about him, for he lit it from a little electric cigarette-lighter, which he produced from his pocket. When the lamp was lit, and burning with a steady flame, he took a clasp-knife from his pocket, a clasp-knife with a long thin blade, and this blade he proceeded to heat in the flame of the lamp, touching it every now and then with a finger-tip to learn the condition of heat it had attained.

When he judged that the blade was hot enough for his purpose, he wiped it quite clean with his handkerchief, and then began, very carefully and dexterously, with the care and dexterity of practised familiarity, to wheedle the heated steel beneath the wax of the great seal that closed down the flap of the envelope. Slowly, steadily, delicately, he urged his implement upon its way. This required care; also it required patience. Again

and again he had to re-heat the steel in the pale blue flame of the spirit lamp, again and again to wipe it clean, again and again to repeat his insinuating attack upon the guardian wax.

At length, after what seemed to the worker an interminable time, though it was really no more than a few minutes, the wax yielded to the persistent application, and the steady labourer was able to detach the seal from its place.

But if the seal was removed, there was yet another obstacle to be overcome. Before being sealed, the gummed flap of the envelope had been secured in the ordinary way. To undo this was not, however, a difficult matter for the worker. Again the heated blade of the knife served to part the tip of the flap from its point of attachment. Then the man took the small brush of the stamp-damper on his desk, and with its moistened hairs pinched to a point, he proceeded gently to wet the lifted point of paper underneath, steadily dissolving the dried gum and increasing the amount of flap detachable from its hold until it was wholly unfastened, and the envelope surrendered its contents to the explorer's discretion.

Hurriedly he pulled out the papers it had guarded so unsuccessfully, glanced rapidly at them, and then with a sigh of satisfaction, thrust them into the breast-pocket of his coat. It seemed, however, that with the acquisition of the papers his task was not entirely accomplished. He drew from a side-pocket some folded paper, which he now slipped into the vacancy of the rifled envelope. He dried the moisture of the flap with the heated steel and helped himself to the gum-bottle to make the flap adhere again to the envelope. Then he took up the seal that Winbush had used, and its companion stick of wax, heated the wax in the flame of the lamp and re-

sealed the envelope. When he had done he surveyed his handiwork with much approval. Nobody could guess that the envelope had been tampered with.

He blew out the flame, and taking up the envelope and his torch, he returned as carefully as before into the workshop, closing, as before, the door behind him, and again committing the hall to its habitual nocturnal dimness and peace.

Only for a moment or two, however. Then the door on the landing opened, the door at the head of the stairs that communicated with the sleeping apartments. A gleam of light came through the opening, a gleam of light that was followed by the appearance of Gondoline. She was clad only in her night-dress and a pretty silk dressing-gown and she carried a lighted candle in her hand. With a careless glance into the dim depths with whose supremacy the little flame she bore feebly contended, she proceeded to descend the stairs. The soft bedroom slippers that she was wearing made her descent as noiseless as she wished it to be, though she knew that even if she had made a noise, it would not be likely to waken her father, who habitually slept heavily after his hard day's work. She, however, less fortunate to-night, had found herself unable to sleep, and after vainly trying to lull herself to slumber with some of the familiar books in her room, she had decided to descend to the hall and retrieve the book that she had discarded earlier in the evening.

She knew where she had left it; as she reached the final stair, she could see it where it lay. Swiftly and soundlessly she crossed the room and picked it up. Then having secured the prize she had come to seek, she turned and ascended the stairs, and passed out of sight through the door.

That was the very moment that chance or fate decided to be the moment at which the mysterious visitor should emerge from the workshop, and, busy with his instrument again, fasten the door behind him. He closed it, indeed, with a little less care than he had used so far, for he made a noise, slight, indeed, but just loud enough to attract the attention of the disappearing Gondoline. She stood still for a moment in the bedroom corridor, listening intently. Surely she could hear the sound of someone moving stealthily in the room below.

Instantly she blew out her candle, her mind suddenly thronged with confused memories of the talk of the night. She opened the door of the landing very softly and peered into the place she had just quitted.

A man was moving warily in the hall, his presence made evident by the light of the electric torch he carried. In a flash she realized that mischief was afoot, realized also that her father would not be the man to grapple with it. The wild animal in her nature had the wild animal's courage. Rapid as a cat, she sprang to the bureau, set down her candlestick and her book, and opening the drawer, seized upon the revolver that lay inside. Before the intruder had time to realize that his presence was discovered, Gondoline had switched on the electric-light, vividly illuminating the whole place, and had aimed the revolver steadily enough at the supposed burglar.

"Who is there," she called out, and as the startled man turned in her direction, she added hastily: "Don't move, or I'll fire."

But even as she spoke she nearly let the pistol fall from her fingers, for she saw that the man she was aiming at was Charlie Trevor.

CHAPTER XXIX

DEUS EX MACHINA

FOR a moment Trevor was silent, a moment of rapid calculation, of swift decision. He had neglected his appointed undertaking to philander with this girl. He had been reprimanded by those he served for his delay. He had been spurred by imperative command to take immediate action. Well, he had taken action and gained the prize. Was fate going to give him the girl as well?

He looked up at the girl assuredly and spoke quite quietly in a low, even voice:

"Don't fire, Gondoline, if you don't mind; there's a dear. It's all right."

Gondoline lowered the revolver, and her voice thrilled with a very real amazement.

"Charlie," she said, in an astonished whisper, "what are you doing there?"

The situation absolutely bewildered her, but she was very clearly conscious of one thing, that if she had been anxious before not to waken her father, she was still more anxious not to do so now.

Trevor stared fixedly at her with a well-carried air of passion.

"Can't you guess?" he asked, charging his words with meaning, with pleading.

Gondoline seemed still unable to realize what had happened, what was happening.

'What does it all mean?' she murmured, with a dazed look on her face. "I don't understand. Why are you here?"

The spasm of courage that had led her to valiant action had ebbed away; she felt suddenly unnerved and helpless. The hand that held the revolver hung limply down by her side. She could feel the chill of the weapon against her leg through the thin silk, through the thin tissue.

Trevor answered her, making his confession with an air of desperate frankness: "I came to see you."

The audacity of the statement increased Gondoline's bewilderment.

"To see me at this hour?"

Trevor beckoned to her, entreating.

"Come to me, Gondoline."

With her free hand Gondoline drew her silken gown closer about her with a shiver.

"I can't," she protested. "I've got no clothes on."

She giggled a little as she spoke, tickled, in spite of her nervousness, by the humours of the situation. But Trevor seemed wholly serious.

"Come down the stairs at least," he begged. "I've come here to talk to you. I've run all this risk because I must talk to you to-night. But I can't talk to you at this distance. We might wake your father, and that would never do."

Gondoline felt the force of this argument, but still she parleyed. The position was distinctly romantic, a page from Pitlow translated into real life. She was conscious of a kind of wild enjoyment of it all.

"Why do you want to see me to-night? Why can't you wait till to-morrow morning?"

"Because I must see you to-night, because to-morrow

will be too late. Please, please, come down to me, Gondoline."

The emotion in the call moved her to obey; her native shrewdness warred with the inclination.

"If I do come down," she said, capitulating, "will you promise not to touch me?"

"I promise."

"Word of honour?"

"Word of honour."

Gondoline replaced the revolver in the bureau, drew the dressing-gown closer about her, and slowly descended the stairs, a sport of many emotions. She was at once puzzled, annoyed and amused, but, above all, she was conscious that she was delightfully excited.

Trevor watched her eagerly as her slippers feet fell silently from stair to stair. When she had come to the end, she stopped, and facing her lover, questioned him with as much asperity as her excitement could command.

"What is the meaning of this extraordinary conduct?"

Trevor spoke rapidly, fervently.

"It means that I love you, Gondoline. If I am acting madly, that is why, because I love you madly."

Gondoline did not find the explanation wholly satisfactory, even if it were flattering.

"But why must you creep into the house at midnight like a burglar to tell me this, which you have already told me several times to-day?"

Trevor made a gesture, as if he were flinging his heart at her feet.

"Because I hadn't told you all I had to tell you. You were so unkind to me this evening that I felt I must see you again."

Gondoline looked at him with knitted brows.

"How could you have hoped to see me? You could not have guessed that I should come down here for a book?"

Trevor's answer came readily, tenderly, apologetic for its intention.

"Forgive me, dearest, but I meant to creep upstairs to your room and kiss you in your sleep."

Gondoline flushed hotly.

"Did you indeed," she said sarcastically, though her voice trembled as she spoke. "And suppose I had been startled—for I don't usually have visits from gentlemen in my bedroom—and had screamed out and wakened Dad, what would you have done then?"

"You would not have screamed out," Trevor insisted confidentially. "Your father would not have wakened."

"Suppose my door had been locked?"

"You said the other day that you never locked your door. But if it had been locked, I should have scratched on it softly, and you would have come and asked who was there, and I should have answered, 'It is I, Charlie,' and you would have opened and let me in."

"I should have done nothing of the kind," Gondoline protested stoutly. She was beginning to feel vaguely wishful that she were back in her room with the door securely locked against adventurous young gentlemen.

"Yes, you would, you would. I trust to my luck. Luck favours lovers—lovers like me, that don't count the consequences, but would risk their lives for one kiss of their sweetheart's lips."

While he was haranguing in this impassioned strain Trevor had been stealthily drawing nearer and nearer to Gondoline, who was listening with a troubled face to his words. Suddenly he sprang forward and clasped

her tightly in his arms. Instantly Gondoline's reason re-asserted itself, and she struggled fiercely to set herself free from his embrace.

"Let me go," she said, "let me go! You promised you wouldn't touch me, you promised."

The young man only pressed the girl closer to his breast.

"What if I did? There are promises a man cannot keep if he has hot blood in his veins and his love is by his side. My love is too strong to be bound by such cold promises. You shall absolve me from them with the kisses of your lips."

Gondoline still struggled, still entreated for freedom. She was frightened.

"Let me go," she besought. "Don't be a fool, Charlie; don't be a brute. If you don't let me go, I will call out."

Trevor stifled her remonstrances by kissing her passionately.

"Oh, my love, my love," he whispered, between his kisses, "can you be so cold to me now, when I hold you in my arms so closely, when I kiss you so fondly?"

Gondoline struggled helplessly in his arms. Through her thin raiment her flesh seemed to be bruised by the fierceness of his hold. She wanted to cry out, but could not. Her mind seemed to be stupefied, her body to be alternate fire and ice. Everything seemed to reel around her; her resistance weakened, her tense limbs slackened; she seemed to trail, a powerless captive in his clasp.

"Let me go," she moaned, "please let me go! I feel so giddy. The room is going round."

"Come and rest on the sofa," Trevor suggested, without releasing his hold.

"No, no," Gondoline sighed feebly. She was almost

fainting. She did not scream; her breath came in little sobs.

Trevor was not to be persuaded. Fortune was, indeed, favouring him that evening beyond his wildest hopes.

"Let you go, when you are in my arms? Never, never! I love you, I love you! You love me, I know you do."

He caught up the swooning girl in his arms as if she were a child he was about to carry away. Her head was hanging back, her eyes were closed, she was scarcely conscious.

Suddenly a thing happened which stayed the ardour of the man and revived the senses of the woman.

Somebody was tapping at the glass of the garden window.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE WINDOW

WHEN Wickliff left Tennis-Court House he did so with a contented mind. He had come to the conclusion that it was highly probable that an attempt would be made to lay hands upon the plans of Gregory's Stabilizer that night, and he had made his preparations in accordance with that assumption. He had persuaded Winbush, during the time of their talk in the workshop, to do certain things according to his directions. The persuasion had not been over easy, for Winbush was still inclined to be incredulous of Wickliff's suspicions, but finally Gregory agreed to do what Wickliff wanted. The net was spread in the sight of the bird, and it remained to be seen if it were spread in vain.

Wickliff's immediate business that night was to keep a watch upon the man whom he regarded as the enemy.

It was, of course, quite possible that he might be mistaken in his suspicions of Trevor, but, in any case, it would do no harm to make sure. So after a brief visit to The Minarets, he had gone out again, and had hung about in the darkness in the neighbourhood of Trevor's rooms, in which, when he reached them, a light was burning. Wickliff hid himself in the doorway of a house nearly opposite and waited. The street was absolutely quiet and deserted at that late hour.

After a little while the light in Trevor's window went

out. Now was the moment, Wickliff thought. Nothing seemed to happen for an age, and then Wickliff's trained ears heard the door open softly, and Wickliff's vigilant eyes saw a man wearing a dark overcoat come out of the house where Trevor lodged, and close the door noiselessly behind him, and proceed at a brisk pace along the empty street. The man was Trevor, there could be no doubt of that. Wickliff gave him a good start before following in pursuit. He was confident of his quarry's goal, and there was no need of hurry.

When Trevor was out of sight Wickliff quitted his hiding-place and proceeded to follow him. Wickliff had slipped on a pair of goloshes at The Minarets to deaden the sound of his steps. Thus when he came to the garden door of Tennis-Court House and found it unlocked he was able to follow the garden-path without any fear of making a noise.

All seemed as dark and quiet at Tennis-Court House as tranquillity and respectability could desire, but Wickliff was convinced that Trevor was inside, and he was wondering how he managed to effect his entrance. A cautious tour of investigation rewarded him with the discovery of an open scullery window. This Wickliff, who had provided himself with certain necessaries at The Minarets, dealt with promptly. He closed the window softly, and, then producing a screw-driver, a gimlet and a couple of long screws from his pocket, very nimbly and dexterously, in spite of the darkness, screwed it securely up. Having thus, as he said later, stopped his enemy's earth, he stood for a while where he was, wondering what he should do next. Should he arouse the household and bring about a public discovery of Trevor. Or should he merely wait and see what Trevor

would do when he found that his retreat was cut off, what steps he would take to effect his escape.

Whichever he did, the result would be the same, the annihilation, the obliteration of Trevor as a rival for the affections of Gondoline, which was all that Wickliff wanted. He wished very much that he could see Trevor at work, but that, unfortunately, was impossible. Wickliff made his way cautiously round to the French windows of the hall sitting-room, but they were inscrutably curtained and denying.

Wickliff waited for a long time watching for the faintest sign of any light, for the faintest sound. He could see no light, he could hear no sound. He thought it was probable that when Trevor discovered the screwed-up window and found himself forced to leave the house by some other exit he would most probably choose the garden windows rather than the front door, because the garden windows could be opened almost noiselessly, and it would be almost impossible to open the front door without making a great deal of noise.

Thus Wickliff persevered in his vigil for what seemed an age-long time. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of a faint gleam of light shining through the curtains at a point in the top where they were not quite closely drawn together. This, though he could not guess it, was the moment when Gondoline appeared upon the landing with her candle in her hand. The light flickered and dwindled, then it appeared again vividly for an instant then it disappeared. While Wickliff was speculating as to the meaning of this will-o'-the-wisp his senses were suddenly startled into painful alertness by the reappearance of a gleam of light and by the sound of voices, Gondoline's voice first, and then the voice of Charlie

Trevor. Wickliff pressed his head against the glass and listened for a while. The speakers were speaking with lowered voices, but Wickliff could not catch the drift of their speech. He decided to interrupt the conversation. He tapped loudly on the glass.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PLEASANT TALK

THE noise had startled the pair into rigidity, into stillness. The woman ceased to yield and the man to command. Trevor lowered Gondoline to the ground.

"What was that?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, that was filled with terror.

Gondoline easily disengaged herself from an embrace that had suddenly grown nerveless and stood staring before her with wide eyes. Her senses had swept back to her in an instant, rousing her from torpor, from surrender.

"There is someone knocking at the window," she said quietly. She seemed as if nothing could surprise her on such a night.

Trevor tried desperately to deceive himself and her.

"Impossible!" he insisted.

Even as he spoke the knocking at the window was repeated more loudly and distinctly. It ceased again, and there was a terrifying silence for an instant in which Gondoline and Trevor stared at each other with pale faces.

The silence was broken by a voice outside, the voice of Wickliff Hersham.

"Are you there, Gregory," Wickliff called. "Let me in. I can see the light through the curtain."

Trevor turned to Gondoline. His face was haggard with an unfamiliar fear.

"What is to be done?" he asked, in a gasping whisper.

With the sound of Wickliff's voice Gondoline seemed to regain her self-command.

"How did you get in?" she whispered.

Trevor answered somewhat sheepishly, apologetic through his alarm.

"Through the scullery window. It was quite easy to open."

"Very well. You can get out the same way, but for Heaven's sake don't make any noise, or there'll be the devil to pay. Make haste!"

Trevor darted to the door that led to the outer hall and disappeared, without another word. When he had left the room Gondoline went to the window just as the knocking began again on the pane.

"Who is there?" she asked, in a voice that she did her best to make deliberately angry.

The voice of Wickliff came back cheerily, seeming full of pleased surprise:

"Oh, is that you, Gondoline? I thought it was Gregory pottering about. Let me in."

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't," Gondoline answered, with a faint laugh. "You see, I'm not dressed."

Wickliff's good-humoured voice became suddenly imperative, and his imperiousness to the frightened girl seemed charged with fearful knowledge.

"Nonsense, child, nonsense! Let me in. I must come in, if I have to rouse the house."

Gondoline surrendered. There was really nothing else to do.

"Oh, very well," she answered obediently. She drew back the curtains, unlatched and unbolted the windows,

and Wickliff entered the room. He came in as calmly and blandly as if it were the most usual thing in the world for him to pay a call at Tennis-Court House long after midnight. He showed no surprise at Gondoline's appearance, and, indeed, betrayed no curiosity of any kind.

Gondoline judged it best to stir up a show of anger.

"What on earth do you want here at this time of night?" she demanded, with fairly well-assumed fretfulness.

Wickliff only laughed at her petulance.

"If it comes to that," he said, "what do you want wandering about the house at this time of night, when good little girls should be in their good little beds and dreaming their good little dreams?"

Gondoline made a show of condescending to explain.

"I couldn't sleep," she said; "and I felt hungry, so I came downstairs to the dining-room to get some biscuits. While I was there I thought I heard some knocking at the window here and came back to listen."

All this was ingeniously intended to mask the delay in replying to Wickliff's earliest summonses.

"I see," Wickliff observed dryly. "I'm not sure that I shouldn't like a biscuit too, now that you speak of it."

Gondoline's regained coolness was ebbing again and leaving her impatient and nervous. She was drumming a tattoo on the floor with a slippered foot.

"What do you want?" she repeated angrily. "You didn't come here at this hour of night to eat biscuits?"

"That," admitted Wickliff, "was not my original intention. The night was so fine that I thought a stroll would do me good. I chanced to walk in the lane at the back of your house and found that the garden gate was not fastened. So I entered the garden and saw a

faint line of light over the curtains. I thought Gregory must be up and about. So feeling lonely, I knocked."

Gondoline repeated his words mechanically.

"So feeling lonely you knocked."

Wickliff nodded. "Yes," he agreed.

The girl drew her dressing-gown about her ostentatiously.

"Well," she protested, with a swiftly-assumed demureness, "you can't expect me to keep you company, can you?"

Wickliff looked at her complacently.

"Not like that, I suppose. It wouldn't be proper, would it? Though, after all, you are only a sort of kid, little Gondoline."

"I am nothing of the kind."

Wickliff wagged a forefinger at her playfully.

"You are only a kid still, and a naughty kid, who deserves a whipping."

"No, I don't!" Gondoline said, and pouted. She saw that Wickliff's look was friendly, that his speech was friendly. She wondered what he thought, what he guessed.

She soon knew.

Wickliff took her hand and patted it; he spoke very gently, very confidently.

"I will get your young friend away all right," he assured her.

She flamed up into rebellion.

"I don't know what you mean," she cried angrily. "There is no one here."

"Oh, yes, there is," Wickliff retorted composedly. "A scullery window is a very easy way of entering a house if the catch happens to be weak, but it affords a very poor way of getting out of a house again if some

meddlesome personage happens to be passing and amuses himself by screwing the window up tightly from outside."

Gondoline glared at him.

"You did this?"

"I did. At this moment your young friend is cooling his heels in a dark scullery wondering how his retreat has been cut off, guessing that I had something to do with it, wishing me very heartily at the devil, and wondering what is going to happen next. Really the poor lad must be very uncomfortable."

Gondoline tried to speak, but no words would come. Wickliff watched her with a sympathetic smile.

"What was Charlie Trevor doing here?" Wickliff asked quietly.

Great waves of apprehension and shame and rage seemed to be rolling in upon Gondoline and swamping her. She was never a girl for tears; but suddenly she felt her eyes water and her lips twitch, and she feared that she was going to break down.

"Oh, it's dreadful!" she said, "dreadful! He came to see me."

"Did you expect him?"

"No, no, no. I came down for a book really, and I heard a noise and thought it was a burglar, and it turned out to be Charlie, and he was very wild and foolish. Of course, I'm awfully angry with him, but he can't help it, if he's romantic like that, can he?"

"Perhaps not," Wickliff agreed. "Now run away to bed, kiddie. I will have a word with your young friend."

"Oh, no, you mustn't do that," she said hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, I must," Wickliff responded decisively. "Don't be frightened, little Gondoline. You may trust to me; you *must* trust to me."

"What is going to happen next?" Gondoline questioned dully. She felt a curious sense of relief in the fact that Wickliff had appeared and that Wickliff had taken command of the situation.

"Nothing is going to happen that will be at all unpleasant for you, little Gondoline. Nothing is going to happen that will be at all unpleasant for your young friend Charlie Trevor. I am only going to have a little talk with him. We shan't quarrel, I promise you. I shall only advise him, as an older man with more experience of the world, to conduct his wooing in future under less clandestine conditions. I shall not be aggressive, and I am sure he will take it in good part. Just leave it to me. And so, good-night, Gondoline."

Gondoline gave a little sigh of satisfaction. She was very glad to leave it to him; she was very glad to say good-night. She was feeling very tired, very troubled, and she suddenly felt delightfully confident that she could rely upon Wickliff and that all would be well.

She held out her hand, and Wickliff took it and gave it the friendliest pressure.

"Good-night, dear Wicky."

Without another word she turned and went slowly up the stairs. At the top she did not turn and look back, but slowly crossed the landing and passed out by the door that conducted to her bedroom. Wickliff watched her departure with a faint smile on his lips.

CHAPTER XXXII

MORE PLEASANT TALK

WHEN she was out of sight Wickliff passed into the outer hall, where he switched on the light, and, crossing it, made his way through the deserted kitchen towards the scullery, and opened the scullery door. He had decided on a new plan of action suggested by unexpected events.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Trevor?" he called amiably into darkness. Then he returned to the outer hall sitting-room where he had switched on the light and waited for Trevor, who presently emerged from the security of the domestic regions and glared at him in sulky fury. When he had found himself trapped he had made no attempt to get away by the front door, as he knew that the noise he must inevitably make in unlocking and unbolting would infallibly betray him. There was nothing for him to do but wait upon events, and to rage with baffled passion and dread lest baffled passion might not be all that he had to rage for. Therefore he looked and felt very angry and dangerous as he came forth into the outer hall, but he kept himself under control, for he saw that Wickliff's right hand was carelessly slipped into the pocket of his coat.

Wickliff took no apparent notice of his rival's demeanour, but addressed him as blandly as if the situation were quite natural and ordinary, the kind of thing

that one would expect to happen in a highly respectable suburb.

"I am sorry to have stopped your earth by screwing up the scullery window," he began, in a tone of pleasant apology, "but I really couldn't help it. I didn't wish you to leave the premises quite so unceremoniously."

The unexpected serenity of Wickliff's behaviour tempted Trevor into the momentary belief that, after all, he might be able to carry the matter off with a little display of high-handed bluster.

"Look here, what the devil do you mean by interfering like this?" he challenged. At least, he challenged as much as was compatible with the necessity of keeping his voice well down. It would not at all serve his purpose to rouse the slumbering servants by uttering the volume of sound that he longed to hurl against the suave and smiling Wickliff.

Wickliff replied to his demand by raising his unoccupied left hand in an amiable gesture significant of the wisdom of restraint.

"Pray don't be angry," he requested smoothly. "You see how calm I am. All I wanted to say to you was that though I quite understood how your youthful spirit of romance might tempt you to pay Miss Winbush midnight visits, those visits would almost certainly be liable to misconstruction by a possibly over-susceptible parent. As far as I am concerned I frankly admit that my great admiration for Miss Winbush doesn't give me the faintest right to attempt to control her taste in suitors or her choice of hours of assignation. But I would merely suggest to you, as man to man, that you would show greater consideration for the young lady's reputation by discontinuing these belated visits."

His words flowed comfortably, gratefully over the

senses of his listener. Trevor could scarcely restrain a sigh of relief. It was clear to him that his enemy misunderstood the meaning of his midnight visit; it was plain to him that his own part was to play the manly penitent.

"You are right, Mr. Hersham," he replied, with a fine assumption of candour, "and I see now how far I have been in the wrong. I can only plead the ardour, and, as I need scarcely assure you, the honesty of my passion——"

Wickliff interrupted him, airing a philosophic detachment.

"Plead it in the daytime, my young friend; plead it in the daytime. Boys will be boys, of course, but there comes a time when it is their duty to remember that they are men of the world and men of honour. Why not take Mr. Winbush into your confidence in the morning."

Trevor hesitated. He did not quite know what to say. He was rejoiced to find that the conversation was turning solely on the question of his relations with Miss Winbush, but even that conversation was not without its difficulties.

"Oh, well, of course, you know——" he began, faltering.

Wickliff cut him short.

"Of course," he said, "I am, in a measure, your rival, however unlikely, under the circumstances, you may consider my chance may appear. But I hope I am enough of a sportsman to take my defeat, if I am defeated, in good part, and I am willing to make you a sporting offer."

Trevor looked at his interlocutor suspiciously, wondering what he was driving at, distracted between desire

to get out of the house on any terms and unwillingness to commit himself.

"What is it?" he asked cunningly.

Wickliff beamed upon him with all the benignity of the noble father of old French comedy.

"It has always been my intention to dower Gondoline in the event of her refusing to marry me, and chancing to fix her affections upon a poor man. You, I believe, are a poor man."

Trevor listened to Wickliff's words with the liveliest interest.

"Unfortunately, that's so," he admitted, with a quick resumption of his familiar British frankness. "That, and that only, has been the reason why I have not long since spoken to Mr. Winbush. My prospects are good, but just at present, well, just at present, you know——"

An expressive shrug finished the sentence. It was obvious that, just at present, young Mr. Charles Trevor was not exactly rolling in money.

Wickliff nodded a sympathetic appreciation of Mr. Trevor's financial position and proceeded with his proposal.

"If Miss Winbush marries you, I will settle upon her, in trust, such a sum as will assure her an income of five hundred pounds a year. It is not a fortune, but it would be of very considerable assistance to an ambitious young man with his way to make in the world. So what do you say to coming here to-morrow morning at noon and making a formal offer for her hand?"

Trevor eyed his antagonist warily. He was wondering if any snare could lie hidden beneath this decidedly attractive offer. He was too agitated internally to be able to review his own position at all points with the necessary clearness of judgment, but it did seem as if

he stood in security, as if Wickliff was concerned solely for the reputation and the happiness of the girl they both admired.

"This is very good of you, I am sure," he said slowly and doubtfully. It would not do to appear too elated by the money bribe.

"Not at all," Wickliff responded promptly. "I don't do it for you, as you can readily understand, for that would be rather too much to expect of an unsuccessful rival. I do it because I am so sincerely fond of Miss Winbush that I should be grieved if a paltry question of money should deprive her of the man of her choice. Of course, I am still your rival, but I can say to you, in, I hope, a thoroughly sporting spirit, that my honest heart-felt wish is, 'may the best man win.'"

The directness of Wickliff's manner carried conviction to the younger man.

"Really, it's jolly decent of you." But Wickliff would not suffer him to utter any further eulogy.

"Not at all," he declared, with the breezy cheerfulness of a brave man saluting a brave antagonist. "And now, suppose we say good-night. There really is no need for any more of this Romeo and Juliet business. I am sure you will find that Mr. Winbush will not be at all disagreeable to deal with. But at the same time I am quite sure that he would not like these underhand goings-on, which are unworthy of Miss Winbush, and, if I may be permitted to say so, unworthy of you. Enough said. Good-night. You will find the garden door open."

As he spoke he opened the windows with a show of great politeness. Trevor nodded stiffly, muttered a "good-night," and passed out into the darkness of the garden. Wickliff waited for a while, listening to the sound of his retreating footsteps along the garden-path,

till they ceased, and he heard the faint noise of the closing gate. Then he shut and bolted the windows, drew the curtains. He produced a key from his pocket, went to the door of the workshop, opened it, and passed into the room beyond. He soon returned with a sealed envelope in his hand. He opened it and withdrew its contents. They proved to be so many sheets of blank paper, neatly folded to fit their cover. Wickliff chuckled.

"Really," he said to himself, "that is rather smart of our young friend. Now I'll smoke a pipe and think things over."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A FORMAL CALL

THE next morning was fine, and attuned to Wickliff's spirits, which seemed high, for he whistled a lively air as he made his way from The Minarets to Tennis-Court House. For this occasion, which he felt to be of a formal and ceremonial nature, he did not make use of the garden entrance, but presented himself conveniently at the front door.

Wickliff greeted pleasantly the maid who opened it in response to his summons.

"Good morning, Mary. Is Miss Gondoline down yet?"

It was nigh on high noon, and Gondoline was not habitually a slugabed; but Wickliff was not surprised at the answer he received.

Mary, whose initial admiration for Mr. Hersham had only grown with further acquaintance, favoured him with a smile as she shook her cap.

"No, Mr. Hersham, not yet. Miss Gondoline had a headache and took her breakfast in bed."

Wickliff looked good-humoured disapproval.

"An untidy meal," he pronounced judicially. Then he proffered another query tentatively. "And Mr. Winibus?"

"The master has gone for a stroll, sir," Mary answered. "He said he would be back at twelve o'clock, as you wished."

Wickliff seemed satisfied.

"Righto," he affirmed. "I will wait for him in the hall sitting-room."

He entered the room as he spoke, nestled into the cosiest arm-chair, filled and lit a pipe, and surrendered himself to meditation. Would Trevor come to the scratch or no? On the whole he was inclined to think that he would. Without wishing to flatter himself unduly on his histrionic gifts, Wickliff did believe that his manner had convinced his adversary last night that his concern for Gondoline's reputation was his sole interest in the adventures of the night.

Wickliff endeavoured to put himself into Trevor's place, to consider what he would do, were he Trevor, under the conditions. If Trevor believed, as he had every reason to believe, that Wickliff accepted the theory of an impertinence of love as the excuse for his clandestine presence in Tennis-Court House on the previous night, then he really had very little to risk in coming. He was, no doubt, convinced that the famous sealed letter, whose contents he had so successfully rifled, was already on its way to Authority at the War Office. By the time that Authority at the War Office had discovered the blank emptiness of the thing sent to it, the plans which he had purloined would be in safe hands.

No doubt, Wickliff reasoned that Trevor would reason, Mr. Winbush had kept a copy of his plans for his Stabilizer, or could repeat them, but that was a matter of little moment, so long as those whom it was Trevor's business to serve had the first handling of them. It would be difficult indeed to bring the theft, when it was discovered, home to him. His staying on at Brindling would be, in itself, an argument in favour of his innocence, and, in any case, the longer he stayed, the longer

time he would have in the society of Gondoline, of whom he was plainly greatly enamoured, and the longer opportunity to ply his licit or illicit suit.

Thus, Wickliff argued, Trevor would argue, and arguing thus, it was not merely likely but most probable that Trevor would make his promised appearance. For in failing to make it he would practically give himself away when he had not the least necessity for doing so.

Wickliff had scarcely arrived at this conclusion when his meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Gregory, who came in through the garden.

Winbush was bubbling with inquiries, which Wickliff was firm in declining to satisfy.

"Wait and see, dear boy, wait and see," was the only reply he would vouchsafe. While Gregory was gagging at his discomfiture Mary entered the room and informed her master that Mr. Trevor wished to see him. Gregory stared at this sudden formality of approach on the part of a young gentleman who was accustomed to lounge in and out of the house almost as if it were his own. But Wickliff looked pleased at this proof of the acumen of his deductions, and without wasting time in consulting Winbush, he instructed the maid.

"Will you ask Mr. Trevor to come in? And please tell Miss Gondoline that I want to see her immediately."

Mary disappeared. Gregory turned a bemused face on his friend.

"Have you any idea," he asked, "what Trevor wants, and why he comes in this fashion?"

"I think I could answer both questions," Wickliff responded, "but I think we may very well leave Mr. Trevor to explain his own business."

At that moment Mary ushered in Trevor and retired. The young man advanced and shook hands with Mr.

Winbush and nodded to Wickliff, who returned his salutation with a smile. To one with no knowledge of the situation Trevor would have seemed his usual cheerful, lighthearted, straightforward self. But it seemed to Wickliff that beneath his mask of frank good-fellowship he was both self-conscious and embarrassed.

"Good-morning," Wickliff greeted. "Glad to find that you are so magnificently punctual."

Trevor responded with a heartiness that, if false, was certainly well feigned.

"I always try to be up to time. Best quality there is for a business man."

Wickliff saw that Winbush looked mystified at this talk about punctuality and took it upon himself to explain things.

"Mr. Trevor," he said, "comes, as I believe, to make a request of you, and after that, of your daughter."

The expression of surprise on Winbush's face widened. "Indeed!" he gasped.

Trevor confirmed Wickliff's words.

"Mr. Hershamb has hit the right nail on the head, Mr. Winbush."

He was anxious to explain his mission further, but Wickliff checked him with a lifted finger.

"Allow me, one moment," he requested. He turned to Winbush. "You have always given me to understand, my dear Gregory, that you would leave Gondoline to settle for herself any of those affairs of the heart which are so important to young girls, or which, at all events, young girls think are so important."

Gregory, groping in a maze of bewilderment, could only chirp out an acquiescent: "Quite so, quite so."

"We are now, my dear Gregory," Wickliff went on, "on the edge of a domestic crisis. Amorous youth is

anxious to carry your darling daughter away from you. But we really must not go any farther without our heroine."

He rose from his chair, and going to the foot of the stairs, began calling loudly: "Gondoline! Gondoline!"

Almost immediately the voice of Gondoline was heard in answer from aloft.

"Coming! coming!" the girl cried.

While they could hear her hurrying footsteps in the corridor, Trevor addressed his host.

"I am sure my wishes can be no surprise to you, sir," he said, with just that proper air of deference that a young man should pay to the father of his beloved.

"My young friend," Winbush answered emphatically, "I was in love with Gondoline's mother. I married Gondoline's mother. Nothing can surprise me where Gondoline is concerned."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A PARLIAMENT OF LOVE

GONDOLINE appeared at the head of the stairs and called down to the assembled company with a slightly forced hilarity.

"Well, here I am at last. What am I wanted for in such a hurry?"

Then she ran down the stairs.

"Good morning, Dad," she cried as she kissed Gregory. "Good morning, Wicky. Good morning, Mr. Trevor."

Wickliff, watchful without appearing to be watchful, noted that the girl's face was pale and deeply dark beneath the eyes, and that she had endeavoured to counteract the pallor by the liberal use of rouge. She was plainly embarrassed by the presence of the three men, and the air of formality that seemed to reign over their reunion. She tried to cloak her embarrassment with jocularity.

"I say," she cried, "how solemn you all look! Is anything the matter?"

Wickliff, constituting himself the spokesman of the assembly, advanced towards the girl, and addressed her in a voice of grave tenderness.

"My dear Gondoline, if we look a little solemn, it is perhaps because we feel—or, at least, some of us feel—not a little solemn. Pray be seated."

Everybody took chairs and Wickliff continued his

harangue, which he had been at some little pains to prepare in honour of the occasion.

“Good! Here we all are seated in a very commonplace parlour—forgive me, Gregory, if I seem to crab your digs and sticks—and some of us, at least, must admit to being very commonplace people, and yet here and now we are about to return to one of the most picturesque customs of the Middle Ages and hold a Parliament of Love.”

Wickliff paused to judge of the effect of his exordium upon his audience. He had happened on the term in a newspaper that morning, and had spent a busy few minutes with a little-used encyclopædia, looking the matter up. Trevor's face showed that he understood what Wickliff was talking about. Gondoline was all amazement, and the girl's amazement was visibly shared by her father.

“A Parliament of Love?” Gondoline echoed in astonishment, but her cheeks flushed beneath her rouge, as if she seemed to guess what was coming.

“My dear Wickliff,” Gregory questioned gently, “so early in the day the question is perhaps not a little delicate; but have you by any chance been—how shall I put it?—refreshing yourself?”

Wickliff laughed a jolly laugh.

“Not a drop so far, I assure you, though I daresay I shall drink deeply by and by to drown my sorrow, or, if the fates are kind, to toast my joy.”

Gregory rumpled his scanty locks.

“I really don't understand,” he complained feebly.

Wickliff reproved him forcibly.

“You are not wanted to understand just yet. You are only wanted here for the sake of respectability and conventionality. You are to sit quite still and say noth-

ing, and damn little of that. We only need, under the peculiar conditions which have brought us together, what I may perhaps be permitted to call the sanctification of your presence. The result of our deliberations rests entirely with Gondoline."

Gondoline shaped her mouth for a whistle, and then thought better of it.

"The devil it does!" she said roundly.

Winbush was concerned at his daughter's profanity, and sought to express his concern, but nobody heeded him. Wickliff went on:

"My dear young lady—that seems a proper old-fashioned way of beginning what is, as I have told you, an old-fashioned business—my dear young lady, you are in the peculiar, and perhaps not altogether unpleasing, position of being addressed at the same moment by two suitors for your hand."

Gondoline flushed again and frowned. She was nervous and irritable after the strain of last night's adventures, and the portentous hilarity of Wickliff's manner vexed her desperately.

"Oh, don't be a gheezer, Wicky," she protested fretfully.

Trevor endeavoured to interpolate, to make his personal explanation.

"Miss Winbush, perhaps I might be allowed——" he began, but Wickliff cut him short briskly.

"No, my dear young friend, no; you might not. Your turn will come in a jiffy; but just for the moment I hold the stage, and am, in a word, It."

Trevor looked up angrily at Wickliff. He did not understand the bantering spirit with which Wickliff was conducting the affair, and not understanding, resented it. But Wickliff did not mind.

Wickliff resumed.

"My dear Gondoline, as the elder man"—he turned for a moment to Trevor—"I take it that Mr. Trevor does not contest that point?"

Trevor was beginning to feel annoyed at the turn things were taking. He felt that Wickliff was making game of the matter, and in consequence making game of him.

"By Jove! no," he said, with a spiteful snarl in his voice, but Wickliff paid no attention to his ill-humour, and continued to float on the full-tide of talk.

"As the elder man, by the rules of this Parliament of Love, here assembled, the first I should be inclined to think ever summoned at Brindling Common, as the elder man I have the first go in. I make the rules, so I ought to know. Now, Gondoline, I will not begin by asking you what you think of me as a possible husband. I will begin by telling you what I think of myself as a possible husband."

It gratified Trevor, who was raging at Wickliff's burlesque behaviour, to notice that Gondoline was patently annoyed by it. She spoke now in a very fretful and offended voice.

"I think I would rather not play this silly game any more, if you don't mind."

"But I do mind," Wickliff insisted blandly. "It is very frivolous of you to describe a solemn Parliament of Love as a silly game. It is, I assure you, a very serious solemnity, upon the result of which the happiness of two human beings, or rather of three, depends. You see, Gondoline, two men here present, Mr. Trevor and myself, who are both in love with you, but who cannot both hope to win you."

The mutinous look that had been growing on Gondoline's face while Wickliff was speaking now translated itself into mutinous speech.

"Perhaps neither of you will win me, as you call it," she said tartly.

Wickliff remained persistently urbane.

"Is there anything else you would prefer to call it, that would be quite so decorous? No? Very well, then. To resume. Here am I, Wickliff Hersham, bachelor, middle-aged, no occupation, temporary residence The Minarets, Brindling Common, substantial income from Government securities, health excellent, strength solid, tastes simple, even brutal. Come, now, what do you say to this catalogue of estimable qualities?"

Gondoline felt very fractious at the grotesque performance in which Wickliff was compelling her to take a part. After the high pitch of physical and mental sensation to which she had been turned on the previous night, there seemed to be something degradingly ludicrous in Wickliff's buffoonery. She could see, from the few stealthy glances which she shot at Trevor, that he appeared to be no less indignant than she. As for poor Mr. Winbush, with his puzzled expression, he reminded her, comically and pathetically, of the parrot who was forced into unwelcome companionship with a monkey.

But if Gondoline was furiously annoyed with Wickliff, she could not help feeling a certain irritated amusement at his monkeyings.

"Really, Wicky, you are the limit," she protested, and would have protested further, but that he interrupted her relentlessly.

"I am," he admitted; "also, I am coming to it now.

I have only three more words to say, the simplest words in the world, with the clearest meaning. Other nations, more fortunate perhaps than ourselves, can say the same thing in two words, but our English is good enough for an Englishman and an English girl."

He suddenly abandoned his jesting manner and became for an instant earnest, passionate and sincere.

"I love you."

He spoke the words as he would have spoken them if they had been alone together, he and she, as intensely, as fervently. But they were not alone, and though their utterance thrilled Gondoline, in spite of herself, it seemed to her that there was a kind of impropriety in their public proclamation.

"Really, Wicky," she said angrily, "I don't know what to make of you this morning."

Wickliff answered her with something of a return to his former flippancy.

"I wish you would make an engaged man of me, but you have not to give your decision just yet. I have had my innings, and yield the floor to my rival. Now, Mr. Trevor, speak up for yourself like a hero."

Trevor shot a malevolent glance at Wickliff, but his countenance wore its most pleasing expression as he addressed Gondoline.

"Dear Miss Winbush," he said, "Mr. Hersham is very much older than I am, and has more of the gift of the gab. But the three words that suit him suit me, too, down to the ground, and I can say 'I love you' with all my heart, though I think it is a little unusual and trying to be called upon to say it under these conditions."

Gondoline thought that he looked very handsome and taking, in the youthful honesty of his bearing and his speech.

"They are certainly not romantic," she agreed.

Wickliff thrust his hands into his pockets and stared at the ceiling with a meditative gaze.

"Midnight might be more romantic, I admit. But my Parliament meets in the day-time. Better for the nerves. Pray go on, Mr. Trevor."

Trevor tried to look as if he ignored Wickliff's words, but he did not succeed very well. He continued his speech:

"I am young; I have the health and strength of youth. I think I may say, without vanity, that I am not altogether bad-looking. I make a modest income, but I have prospects that might, not unfairly, be described as topping. Are you willing to share my fortunes?"

Gondoline was stirred by the young man's speech, but she was too exasperated by the conditions under which they were spoken to appreciate them as warmly as she could have wished. She voiced the anger that she felt.

"I really wish that you had both chosen some other way of popping the question, if you both felt that you must either pop or burst. You both look extremely silly, and you make me feel supremely ridiculous."

Trevor hastened to exculpate himself.

"It is not my fault. I had no idea, when I came here this morning to ask Mr. Winbush to permit me to pay you my addresses, that I was to be mixed up in this kind of comedy."

Wickliff took the burden of blame on his own shoulders.

"It was my idea and I like it. The court will now sum up. My dear Gondoline, here we stand—two men who both want you. You may not care for either of us, but I suppose in the present condition of civilization in England, I may take it for granted that you do not

care for both of us. The situation is delicate. Perhaps you could do something to clear it."

Gondoline tapped the carpet angrily with her foot.

"No, I can't," she said, "and, what's more, I won't. If either of you want to make love to me, he must do it properly, as men really propose to girls. I think you are perfectly horrid, Wicky, and I hate you."

Wickliff only smiled. Trevor spoke eagerly:

"I hope you don't hate me, Miss Gondoline, for the part I have been compelled to play in this nonsense."

Gondoline looked at him with a marked show of favour, more, however, to vex Wickliff than to encourage Trevor. What she said was prompted by the same impulse.

"Of course I don't hate you, Mr. Trevor, and I am sure that whoever advised you did so in the hope of damaging you in my eyes. But if he did so, he failed, and all I have got to say is that if you take your chance under less public conditions, you may possibly find me in a better temper than I am in now."

Wickliff turned pleasantly to his rival.

"Well, Mr. Trevor, it seems as if I shall be called upon to congratulate you."

Trevor felt triumphant, and took no pains to conceal his sense of triumph.

"You are very good," he said complacently, with a look of ownership addressed to Gondoline, which that wayward young woman found herself sharply resenting. But she did not show any sign of resentment, for fear that in so doing she should give some satisfaction to Wickliff, whom she was anxious to punish for the morning's work.

Wickliff addressed Trevor with the dignified manner of one who sustains well a lost cause.

" You appear to have gained an enviable place in the heart of a very charming young lady, and are therefore entitled to be envied, most of all by me. But the interest which I take in the happiness of Gondoline, the interest which my dear old friend Gregory Winbush knows that I take in the happiness of Gondoline—an interest which justifies me in airing the affection of a relative, even if I am compelled to relinquish the hopes of a lover—this interest, I say, obliges me to ask you, on behalf of Mr. Winbush, a couple of questions."

Wickliff carried his lengthy sentence successfully to its conclusion, and eyed Trevor curiously. Trevor thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and faced Wickliff insolently. It seemed to him that he had won the game and could afford to wear the laurels.

" Fire away," he said derisively.

" In the first place," Wickliff asked very quietly, " may I, speaking for Mr. Winbush, assume that before your marriage you will take the pains to become a naturalized Englishman?"

Gondoline, who had been on the point of interposing and reprimanding Wickliff for going much too far, and taking too much for granted, was startled into silence by the terms of Wickliff's question.

Trevor was taken mightily aback, and plainly showed it.

" What the devil do you mean? " he blustered.

Wickliff was imperturbable.

" Just that. You are not an Englishman, you know, though I am sure we must all admit that you play the part very prettily."

Gondoline stared at Wickliff, as if she thought that he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. Mr. Winbush, whom the eccentricity of the whole proceeding had

frightened into a kind of coma, showed distinct signs of waking up. Trevor, his air of bluster badly damaged, tried to better things by bluster.

"You damned scoundrel!" he shouted; "how dare you tell such blasted lies?"

Wickliff was deliciously calm; he did not raise his voice.

"Don't get angry," he urged gently. "It is no crime not to be English. It is not even a misfortune, though you appear to have considered it as one, and to have endeavoured to atone for it as completely as possible."

Trevor sprang to his feet and turned to the now alert Winbush with a dramatic gesture.

"Mr. Winbush," he cried, "I appeal to you, as master of this house, to call upon this fellow to refrain from insulting me."

Gregory's reply was a question.

"Surely you are an Englishman, Mr. Trevor?" he asked, and blinked like an inquisitive owl as he spoke.

"Certainly I am," he affirmed hotly, but his affirmation only awakened a broad smile on Wickliff's face.

"I am sorry to be obliged to contradict you," he said placidly; "but we have an Intelligence Department, and it intelligences occasionally. I happen to have a friend in the Intelligence Department who has been good enough to answer certain inquiries of mine. They do not usually take outsiders like myself into the confidence of their knowledge; but under the peculiar circumstances of this case, my friend has consented to untie a little red-tape for my benefit."

As he spoke he took a paper from his pocket.

"I have here a copy of what in France would be called your 'dossier.' It gives your real name, the place of your birth, and the circumstances of your associa-

tion with the 'Verein,' or union, of which the Pan-European Aerial Navigation Syndicate is one of many manifestations of energy. I may mention that it cost me a pretty penny, for we had to do quite a lot of cabling to Canada."

"You are talking damned nonsense," Trevor said doggedly, "and you know it." But he did not look as confident as his words.

There was a silence, broken by Gregory, who cocked his head in the direction of his friend.

"You spoke of a couple of questions, I think."

Wickliff again addressed Trevor.

"In the second place may I, still speaking for Mr. Winbush, assume that before your possible marriage you will return to Mr. Winbush the plans of his Stabilizer?"

Trevor's face flamed; his mouth and his fingers twitched; he was not pleasing to behold.

"Are you crazy?" he gasped.

Wickliff smiled brightly.

"I am quite sane, thank you," he affirmed.

Gondoline, who had been gazing amazed at the scene that was being played before her, the scene that she did not understand, intervened again.

"What on earth are you talking about, Wicky?" she asked.

Gregory blinked at his daughter.

"I think I understand," he said dryly.

Trevor, pale and raging, answered Gondoline.

"He is crazy, I tell you, crazy. But I won't stay here to be insulted any longer."

"Don't be in such a hurry," Wickliff urged. He took from his pocket a sealed envelope.

"This is the envelope which Mr. Winbush addressed to the War Office yesterday, the envelope professing to

contain all the plans of his Stabilizer. That envelope was taken from Mr. Winbush's workshop last night, its contents were removed and some sheets of blank paper were inserted in their place."

Gondoline turned very red and glanced fearfully at Trevor, who stood doggedly defiant.

"What has all this to do with me?" he asked.

"You were in Tennis-Court House last night," Wickliff went on, "long after everyone had gone to bed."

"I came to see Gondoline," Trevor asserted hoarsely.

Wickliff shook his head.

"No, no, you didn't. You came to steal those plans. Your meeting with Miss Winbush was wholly accidental. Really, you managed the thing rather cleverly. I can guess how you faked the key. The only pity is, that from your point of view, you wasted your time."

Trevor said nothing, but his haggard face asked innumerable questions. Gondoline hid her face in her hands. Winbush rubbed the tips of his fingers softly together.

"The papers you stole are of no value. Whoever you may have sent them to will not be grateful for the gift. They were put into that envelope by Mr. Winbush at my request yesterday. They are cod figures, meaningless diagrams, nonsensical calculations. The real plans are safe in the hands of the authorities in London."

Again there were some moments of silence. Trevor seemed to recognize that the game was up. He turned appealingly to Gondoline.

"Miss Winbush, let me explain——" he began, but Gondoline only shuddered at his appeal.

"Oh, go away," she moaned, "please go away!"

She may not have been quite as miserable as she looked, but she certainly looked very miserable. Wick-

liff glanced from the huddled girl to the baffled man with an air of pitying composure.

"I should have been compelled to applaud you if you had succeeded. I can only commiserate you, because you have failed. Don't you think you had better go home?"

Trevor pulled himself together and looked at Wickliff with a menacing smile.

"Perhaps I had," he said deliberately; "but perhaps some day I shall return."

"Well, if you do," Wickliff answered dryly, "I cannot say that we shall be glad to see you, but I think we shall be ready to see you."

There was another moment of silence, a moment charged with many emotions, triumph, and grief and hate. Trevor glanced sullenly around him, his glance rested for a moment on the weeping girl. Then he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XXXV

RING OUT, WILD BELLS

GREGORY WINBUSH gave a sigh of relief as he heard the sound of the front door shutting behind the departing guest. Then he turned to Wickliff with extended hand.

"My dear old man," he said, "how can I ever thank you for all that you have done for me?"

Wickliff wrung the proffered hand warmly. Then he pointed to where Gondoline sat crumpled up in the big arm-chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"You will thank me best," he said, "by leaving us alone together."

Gregory paused for a moment, surveying his weeping daughter and his smiling friend. He had seen the first Gondoline crying, and she used to cry just like that. Time seemed for a moment to be annihilated and he shivered. He felt a wild, futile desire to warn his friend, to beseech him, but the expression on Wickliff's face as he looked at Gondoline assured him that the attempt would be but waste of breath. He nodded, sighed, and disappeared into his workshop as some timid animal might disappear into its burrow.

After Winbush had departed, Wickliff stood for a while in silence, meditatively watching Gondoline where she sat sobbing and heaving her shoulders in a paroxysm of grief. He had certainly succeeded in routing his rival. It now remained to be seen what fate the fortunes of

war reserved for him. He had not misinterpreted in the least Winbush's hesitation of the moment before, but he reflected with a certain ironic amusement that if the Gondoline of to-day was even as the Gondoline of yesterday, the Wickliff of to-day was not in the least like the Gregory of yesterday or the Gregory of any time.

After a little while, when he thought that Gondoline had been allowed to indulge in the luxury of tears for a sufficiently long period, he crossed over to where she sat hunched and sobbing and laid his hand gently on an agitated shoulder.

"Gondoline," he said softly, "I have something to say to you."

The girl lifted for a moment a tear-stained and in consequence somewhat rouge-raddled face to his.

"What do you want?" she whimpered petulantly.

"Of course, I can understand that it is a great shock to you to discover that the young gentleman whom you found so pleasant a companion and so agreeable a wooer was, after all, only out to steal your father's secret."

Gondoline uplifted a smeared, angry face, and railed at him between her sobs.

"How can you be so petty, so unjust, so mean! Of course, it was very wrong of Charlie—of Mr. Trevor—to want to steal Dad's papers, but I know he was fond of me, all the same. After all, he wanted to marry me as much as you do."

Wickliff looked at her pityingly.

"He wanted to marry you because I promised to settle a comfortable income upon you if he did. I had a game with him, but I played fair enough. I gave him the chance to be fair with you. But I couldn't very well look on and let you marry a gentleman of his profession

without letting you know whom you were marrying, could I?"

Gondoline dabbed viciously at her blubbered cheeks and streaming eyes.

"I suppose not," she whimpered doubtfully.

Wickliff took her by the shoulder and gave her a little shake.

"Now, child, don't cry and don't prevaricate. I don't in the least blame Mr. Trevor—yes, let us still call him Mr. Trevor—for trying to get at your father's secret. That was his business and his duty, and he did it on the whole pretty well, and probably would have done it better, if he hadn't been side-tracked a little by his flirtation with you."

"It wasn't a flirtation," Gondoline insisted and sniffed dismally. "He was in love with me, and he wanted to marry me, so there."

"All right. Let us take that for granted. But you couldn't marry a man who was your father's enemy, your country's enemy. After all, you are an Englishwoman."

Gondoline made an effort to pull herself together. She straightened up and looked defiantly at Wickliff.

"I never said I wasn't."

"And an Englishwoman ought to marry an Englishman."

"Mr. Trevor was very like an Englishman," Gondoline declared defensively.

Wickliff found himself honestly obliged to admit as much.

"He was, confound him! It was very well done, almost too well done. Nobody ever yet was quite so English as he seemed to be. Of course it was a pull to be born in Canada. Anyhow, he's out of the running.

He's biffed his stroke and taken his hook, and I don't think we need talk any more about him."

"Then what are we to talk about?" Gondoline asked aggressively.

Wickliff patted himself on the chest.

"About me."

Gondoline made a face.

"But we have said all there is to say about you long ago."

Wickliff shook his head.

"Oh, no, we haven't, and even if we had, there is a good deal to say about me which is worth while saying more than once. I am very well off indeed; barring millionaires, I might truthfully call myself quite rich. I am healthy, good-tempered, amorous, generous, quite worth while taking a little pains to conciliate. Gondoline, will you marry me?"

Gondoline looked straight before her staring steadily at the wall.

"No," she answered stubbornly.

Wickliff did not appear to be tremendously impressed by the girl's answer.

"I warn you that if you persist in your refusal, I shall take you at your word and hoof it, and you won't have another chance. I should like to marry you, but I am well aware that the world is wide, and that you are not the only pretty woman in it. There are lots of nice girls at the disposal of a man who is still lusty, who has pocketsful of money and a sense of humour."

Gondoline switched her gaze from the wall and glared at Wickliff like an angry cat.

"A very unpleasant sense of humour."

"That is as it may be," Wickliff answered dispassionately. "Come, Gondoline, will you have a husband

who is also a lover, pretty clothes, jewels, theatres, restaurants, travel, all kinds of good times. Think of The Minarets. Why you can be the queen of Brindling, if you like. Will you marry me?"

Gondoline denied him as fiercely as before.

"No, no, no!" she cried on a rising scream.

As she uttered the third "no" she rose from her chair and threw herself into Wickliff's extended, inviting arms.

"Oh, Wicky," she said, as she felt his clasp about her, "do you really think we shall ever be happy together?"

Wickliff answered cheerfully, caressing her:

"Oh, yes, I think we shall. I'll see to that."

THE END







